DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 822 RC 021 369

AUTHOR	Stephens, E. Robert
TITLE	Expanding the Vision: New Roles for Educational Service Agencies in Rural School District Improvement.
INSTITUTION	Appalachia Educational Lab., Charleston, WV.
ISSN	ISBN-1-891677-00-4
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	170p.; Developed in cooperation with the American Association of Educational Service Agencies.
AVAILABLE FROM	The Rural Center, AEL, Inc., P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348 ($18.00 plus $1.80 shipping).
PUB TYPE	Books (010) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC07 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Change; Educational Planning; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Institutional Characteristics; *Institutional Environment; *Intermediate Administrative Units; *Rural Education; *Rural Schools; *School Districts; State School District Relationship; Strategic Planning; Tables (Data)
IDENTIFIERS	*Capacity Building

ABSTRACT

This book examines the role of the educational service agency (ESA) in the process of enabling and facilitating rural school improvement. The introductory chapter discusses the continuing significance of rural education, service to rural districts as an explicit reason for establishing ESAs, and the characteristics of several types of ESAs. Chapters 2-6 outline: (1) the school improvement agenda confronting rural districts; (2) the institutional strengths and weaknesses of rural districts; (3) a perspective on an effective rural school improvement process; (4) the current ways that ESAs provide assistance to rural districts; and (5) the roles that ESAs might play in enhancing rural school improvement efforts. Three strategic goals are identified that would place ESAs in a meaningful first-line supportive role for rural school improvement. These goals are further developed in the final three chapters: (1) enhancing the institutional capacity of rural districts (access for disabled students, access for general students and adults, access to telecommunications technologies, cost-savings and related practices, comprehensive assessments); (2) enhancing the ability of rural districts and communities to engage in a school improvement process (capacity building, critical analysis of district and community, assessment of implementation plans); and (3) providing regional leadership for the advancement of education. An appendix details the planning process for rural school improvement. Contains 136 references and 25 data tables and figures. (SAS)

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By E. Robert Stephens

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New Roles for Educational Service Agencies in Rural School District Improvement

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Expanding the Vision

Expanding the Vision:
New Roles for Educational Service Agencies in Rural School District Improvement

E. Robert Stephens

The Rural Center
at
AEL
Appalachia Educational Laboratory
Charleston, West Virginia

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This monograph was developed in cooperation with the
American Association of Educational Service Agencies

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Appalachia Educational Laboratory
Post Office Box 1348
Charleston, West Virginia 25325-1348
304/347-0400
800/624-9120 (toll-free)
304/347-0487 (Fax)
aelinfo@ael.org
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Foreword

Educational service agencies (ESAs) and the rural schools that they serve receive little attention in the educational reform literature. However, E. Robert Stephens is one scholar who has consistently directed his personal interests and commitments to the advancement of both. He has keenly observed and written about the nation's ESAs for almost 40 years and has also served as president of the National Rural Educational Association. In *Expanding the Vision*, Stephens challenges us to rethink the role of ESAs in future rural school improvement. This is timely advice as ESA supporters and critics in some states have engaged in a debate about the appropriate role of ESAs. Some observers have suggested new accountability measures.

Stephens describes the ambitious and demanding education reform agenda now challenging many school districts of rural America. He concludes that these reforms comprise a daunting school improvement agenda for rural districts already burdened with obstacles in their institutional capacities. Stephens also describes the ways ESAs currently help rural districts provide effective schooling to rural children and youth. He argues that many individual and state networks of ESAs have much to be proud of in their current efforts. Yet, rural school improvement will clearly require much more in the future.

Stephens promotes the potential *leadership* role of ESAs by presenting three major goals and related objectives for their work. He recognizes that ESAs cannot alone reduce the impact of economic and political forces transforming rural communities. However, he urges them to exercise their full potential in helping schools provide a level playing field for rural students. To help rural school reformers toward this end, Stephens outlines 12 lessons learned regarding the *process* of school improvement and offers five phases of a rural school improvement process.

Some readers will want this monograph to better understand the long-term partnership of ESAs and school districts working to improve schooling for rural students and communities. Others may want to read these pages to consider a more expansive role for ESAs--one that could

benefit not only the districts they work within, but an entire region. Those who know Bob Stephens will want to reread his thoughts about what it means to fully accept the challenge and reward of providing higher quality educational opportunities for rural students.

It is a pleasure to offer this monograph as the first book of The Rural Center at AEL.

Hobart Harmon, Senior Manager
National Rural Education Specialty
Appalachia Educational Laboratory

Acknowledgments

Special thanks are also due to the many people who provided information used in this paper: Susan Custer, Oklahoma Facilitator Center; Steven Nelson, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; Deborah Jolly, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory; Peggy Cook, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture; and the staff of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL), who again here, as in the past, never failed to respond to a request in a helpful and timely way. Ted Coladarci granted permission to reprint tables 5, 8, and 9, which originally appeared in the journal he edits, the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*. Additionally, thanks are extended to Timothy Parker of the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture for preparing electronic files of the maps shown in figures 3-5 that are used in this publication.

Laurel Klein who typed the draft of the paper, usually under a tight timeline, also deserves special acknowledgment, as does Penny Sebok of AEL, who entered changes to the manuscript through its various revisions. Kim Cowley, Pat Penn, Steve Culver, Kim Suiter, Velma Mitchell, Carolyn Luzader, and Pat Cahape Hammer all helped prepare the manuscript for publication.

Foremostly, though, appreciation is extended to the staffs of the several scores of exemplary educational service agencies scattered across the country in nonmetropolitan and metropolitan areas alike, who have not only served to inspire my work over the years, but, more importantly, have touched the lives of many. Their efforts on behalf of public education thus stand as irrefutable evidence of what is possible.

Executive Summary

Rural education reform is best understood in the larger context of the national movement to improve public education, a movement which many consider to be of historic proportions. At this time, the national reform movement has entered its third wave: the first wave was launched in the mid 1980s by the U.S. Department of Education report *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, Larsen, Baker, and Campbell, 1983) and was characterized by state-imposed, top-down requirements affecting such things as high school graduation requirements, the comprehensiveness of school accreditation standards, and teacher certification requirements. The second wave spanned the late 1980s and early 1990s and called for changes in education's social structures–including rules, roles, and relationships among various stakeholders. Today, we have entered the third wave in the education reform movement, calling for systemic reform. The dominant priorities of this period include developing content standards, aligning performance assessments with the new standards; training teachers to respond to changes in curriculum and assessment; and involving a broader spectrum of stakeholders in the management of schools.

Rural schools should be and are full partners in this process. Although recent studies have developed an understanding and appreciation for the particular strengths of rural schools and communities, educators in rural places also face severe infrastructural and organizational challenges. These challenges cannot be ignored if states intend to succeed in meeting their school improvement goals because even in some of the most urbanized states substantial segments of the total school enrollments attend rural schools. Nationally, 1990 census data show that:

- rural districts represented nearly half (47.2 percent) of the approximately 15,000 public school districts,
- rural schools represented slightly less than a quarter (22.3 percent) of the approximately 80,000 schools,
- rural schools and districts enrolled slightly less than one eighth (11.8

percent) of the nearly 40 million public school students, and

- these districts employed slightly more than one eighth (13.4 percent) of the 2.2 million public school staff (Elder, 1994, pp. 13-19).

In many states, the original and ongoing rationale for maintaining a system of educational service agencies (ESAs) is to provide resources and services to rural districts. Originally formed in the 1950s to address the needs of rural districts undergoing massive reorganization, ESAs today are no less essential in providing leadership and services to rural districts facing the challenges of systemic educational reform. In turn, the success of rural districts could have a major impact on the overall success of state education reform efforts. Statewide networks of ESAs exist in nearly half of the 50 states, while various other agencies–collaboratives, consortia, cooperatives, and clusters that serve two or more neighboring districts–exist in most other states.

The Rural School District Improvement Agenda

Current expectations of rural public education have been shaped by a variety of forces. The national and state reform movements, as mentioned previously, have provoked a variety of policy initiatives–some grounded in school effectiveness research that was conducted in the 1960s and 1970s and others in response to court decisions–that have expanded the concept of equal educational opportunity. Additionally, global economic forces have impacted local economies by putting pressure on rural schools to become partners in efforts to revitalize local economies. Taken together, these forces have shaped an ambitious and demanding rural education reform agenda. In most states it includes the following components:

Providing equal access to educational opportunity. Court decisions drive this component of the rural education reform agenda. States are under pressure to improve equity in several ways: by removing barriers caused by race, lack of local wealth, gender, disabilities, and geography; by protecting due process rights of teachers and students; and by establishing standards of adequacy and opportunities to learn (Stephens, 1992). Some observers (Wood, 1995) predict that the courts will continue to play a powerful role as policy makers in public education, in part because state legislatures have abdicated responsibility for setting education finance policies that adequately distribute resources to all state residents. In response to court decisions, some states (Alabama, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Ohio) have established curriculum prescriptions for achieving specific student outcomes (Pipho, 1994).

Achievement of high standards. The eight national education goals established by the Goals 2000: Educate America Act have now been institutionalized in 47 states (Pipho, 1994). Other important provisions of Goals 2000 are the requirements that states outline how they will (1) develop curricular-content standards for the disciplines identified in the national education goals, (2) establish student performance standards that are aligned with the content standards, (3) establish professional development standards aligned with the content and performance standards, and (4) approach the design of opportunity-to-learn standards. Despite concerns in some quarters that the promotion of content standards will lead to a national curriculum, it is likely that this item on the rural education reform agenda will continue to be important.

Site-based management. This reform is based on an organizational theory that the decentralization of authority to the lowest possible organizational level as well as the engagement of all stakeholders in decision making will improve the quality of decisions and, subsequently, the quality of the work of the organization. Support for this concept is widespread, and this may spring from a climate of crisis based on the perception that fundamental changes are needed in the structure and governance of an educational system that is not working (Stinnette, 1993). Although a tension exists between the legal responsibilities of states and districts and their willingness to relinquish power to building sites, the public commitment pushing this reform remains so strong that it will continue to be on the rural school improvement agenda.

Parental involvement and choice. Based on an overwhelming body of research that supports the central role of parents in shaping a child's attitude toward success in school, this reform has been institutionalized by Goals 2000 and in most state legislative efforts to promote site-based management. Parents are also being given more and more options from which to choose: intradistrict choice options that allow attendance at schools within the same district; interdistrict choice options that facilitate attendance at schools outside a student's home district; and in some places, the charter school movement that offers parents additional choices and opportunities to become involved.

Promotion of education partnerships. Partnerships between business and schools offer many potential benefits for business (e.g., gaining improved public relations, better prepared entry-level employees, and decreased training costs) and schools (e.g., increasing public confidence and support for education, enhancing opportunities for

professional growth, and increasing human and financial resources). Current reform movements call for additional partnerships as well–among elementary-secondary schools and postsecondary institutions, and among schools and other human services providers–some calling for complete integration of education and child-serving health and social agencies.

Promotion of the use of technology. America–if it is to remain competitive in a global economy some observers argue–must have a workforce with the competencies and skills to function in an information age world economy. Others see promise in using various computer and telecommunications technologies to increase learning. However, much work remains to be done in providing rural schools access to equipment and in training staff to use various learning technologies effectively.

School as community learning center. Schools typically represent one of the richest assets in rural communities–in fiscal resources, physical plant and equipment, and human resources. Thus, schools have many of the building blocks needed to revitalize rural communities (Gooler, 1994). Some observers predict that schools increasingly will be compelled to offer adult education and access to their costly computers and communications systems to local community groups and businesses (Cetron, 1988).

Use of community to enrich curriculum. Strong evidence supports the effectiveness of experiential education, which can take place in the local community. Using the community as curriculum can also compensate for limited resources in other areas (Nachtigal, Haas, Parker, & Brown, 1989). The study of a school community's local place can develop several dimensions of students' intellects, including direct observation, investigation, experimentation, and skill in applying knowledge (Orr, 1992).

School involvement in community development. Viable, healthy schools need viable, healthy communities; the two are indispensable to each other. Schools can help strengthen their communities by delivering a quality education to all, expanding their mission to include the educational needs of the whole community, teaching students and other residents about their community and how it works, preparing residents to accept and use modern technology, developing leadership and entrepreneurial abilities, and advocating for schools as key elements in community development (Mulkey, 1992).

Conclusions. Taken together, these reforms comprise a daunting school improvement agenda, especially for rural districts that are already burdened with handicaps in their institutional capacities. The next section considers the condition of rural systems, including both the assets and liabilities that various rural systems and communities bring to their school improvement efforts.

Institutional Capacity of Rural School Districts and Communities

Rural school district capacity. A useful way to analyze the capacity of educational organizations involves an examination of three categories of features: educational organizations' structures, the processes they use in decision making, and cultural elements.

District organizational/structural features. Rural school districts tend to be small. Of the 7,145 rural districts in the nation, 96 percent have enrollments of less than 2,500 and over 40 percent have fewer than 300 students. In the South, many school districts are county wide, so few of them have enrollments under 300. However, such small enrollments are common in New England, the Midwest, and the West.

In comparison with urban and suburban districts, rural districts tend to be less elaborately bureaucratic, have lower pupil-teacher ratios, and lower dropout rates. On the other hand, they tend to have fewer management support services available, greater per pupil cost, higher numbers of teachers teaching outside their major specialty at the secondary level, and less competitive salaries and benefits. Rural communities put forth a greater fiscal effort to support their schools, but they have less fiscal capacity from which to draw and higher per pupil costs. They also have less specialized space and equipment for science, math, and languages.

District process features. Compared with urban and suburban districts, fewer planning and evaluation support services are generally available in rural districts.

District cultural features. Rural districts tend to have greater parent involvement and community support than urban and suburban districts.

Condition of rural communities. Conditions vary among rural communities across the nation, depending on factors such as the impact of globalization on the local economy or mechanization of rural industries. Overall, though, the most severe consequences of the restructuring of the national economy and the transformation in the world economy appear to have been felt by rural communities located

in farming-dependent, manufacturing-dependent, mining-dependent, and persistent poverty nonmetropolitan counties. Population changes are, in general, most severe in rural communities located in farming-dependent counties in the Midwest, and in manufacturing-dependent and mining-dependent counties in most other regions. A strong majority of the persistent poverty counties are located in the South. On the other hand, the economic condition of rural communities situated in the 244 government-dependent and 190 retirement-destination counties appears to be relatively stable–even relatively prosperous in the case of the latter (Butler & Beale, 1994).

Capacity of rural local governments. According to one analysis (Ayres, et al. 1990), the barriers confronting rural local governments tend to fall into eight categories: *geographic isolation* (negatively affects service delivery, response time for emergency services and professional networking); *low population density* (low incidence makes specialized services hard to justify and per unit cost of providing many other services is higher); *mobility* (public transportation services are generally limited); *lack of fiscal resources* (problems such as high poverty, urban bias in many grant programs, and lack of awareness of programs designed to aid rural areas are exacerbated by lack of staff to seek out grants); *lack of expertise and human resources* (leads to few training opportunities, low quality of certain public services, inattention to long-range planning, and understaffing of many functions); *personal familiarity* (advantage includes personal attention to individual needs but disadvantages include reluctance by residents to seek certain services such as mental health, drug addiction, or treatment for alcoholism); *resistance to innovation* (pervasive conservative attitudes inhibit provision of nontraditional services); and *lack of ancillary services* (some services are provided through family, friends, religious organizations, and volunteers).

Conclusion. This profile of rural districts and communities has implications for the work of educational service agencies. By considering this portrait and studying the needs in their own regions, ESAs can build on strengths and concentrate their energies in areas of weakness as they provide first-line support to their rural district constituencies.

Ways ESAs Currently Assist Rural Districts

Educational service agencies across the country approach their mission of providing services to rural school districts in both common and divergent ways; this section considers the commonalities. By understanding current programming, it will be easier to consider future

possibilities for ESA programs and services. Experience and studies conducted by the author have provided information for developing three categories of services typically offered by ESAs:

- *direct instruction to students and adults*–especially to disabled students, but to a lesser extent also including vocational/technical, occupational, outdoor/environmental, and adult education;
- *instructional support services*–especially related to curriculum and staff development, provision of instructional materials and technology, and social work; a limited number of ESAs also offer counseling, guidance, and health services; and
- *management support services*–very often including data processing, cooperative purchasing, and legislative monitoring; and less often including program evaluation, financial and facility planning, and strategic planning.

The prominent role of ESAs in assisting rural districts in school reform was established in a large study recently conducted by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) in its eight-state region (Friedman & VanderPloeg, 1993). Educational service agencies were the most frequently cited external provider of basic services (e.g., student services and a range of school management and operations services) and capacity-building services (e.g., professional development, curriculum development, student assessment, technology acquisition and support, and school improvement planning) received by rural principals. However, the same study found that 89 percent of rural principals thought they were not getting all of the services they needed to keep pace with reform initiatives undertaken in their respective states. This finding has implications for service providers beyond just ESAs; it also has implications for the future of state education reform.

Based on the NCREL study and previous work, the author proposes the following estimates of the impact of current ESA programming on common weaknesses in the institutional capacity of rural districts:

- *supportive or very supportive impact*–in response to weaknesses in management support services, per pupil costs, programs and services for special populations, and availability of instructional support services;
- *limited supportive impact*–in response to weaknesses in breadth and depth of secondary program, availability of telecommunications technology, fiscal capacity, and availability of planning support services and evaluation support services; and

- *neutral (or no) impact*–in response to weaknesses in the number of teachers teaching outside their field, competitiveness of salaries and benefits, and specialized space and equipment available for labs.

Additionally, ESAs' current programming is estimated to have varying impact on rural district school improvement efforts. With regard to addressing the needs related to improving educational equity, ESAs are estimated to have a–

- *very supportive impact* on eliminating handicapping condition barriers;
- *somewhat supportive impact* on eliminating local wealth and geography barriers, and on introducing adequacy criteria; but
- *neutral impact* on eliminating race and gender barriers and applying due process rights.

With regard to supporting emerging national and state policy initiatives, ESAs are estimated to have a–

- *supportive impact* on efforts to achieve high standards and accountability;
- *somewhat supportive impact* on early childhood education, education partnerships, and technology initiatives; but
- *neutral impact* on site-based management and parental involvement and choice initiatives.

Finally, ESAs are estimated to have a *neutral impact* on districts' attempts to address other pressures such as calls for the redesign of the school as a community learning center, redesign of the curriculum using community as a focus, and calls for the involvement of schools in community development.

What Educational Service Agencies Must Do in the Future

The profile of current ESA programming shows that many rural districts across the country have benefitted from the presence of an ESA in their region. While many individual and state networks of ESAs have much to be proud of in their current efforts on behalf of rural systems, it is clear that much more work will be required in the future. The school improvement agenda outlined previously, even if only partially accepted, and the rural school improvement process (see appendix) will place great demands on ESAs. Though challenging, the demands present an unparalleled opportunity for ESAs to demonstrate to policy and local communities that they can be an indispensable, responsive, and accountable first-line support system on behalf of rural districts.

To meet these challenges, ESAs will need to reconsider fundamental ideas about their missions, overarching goals, and core objectives. Across the nation, ESAs have been charged with a consistent expectation that they aid local districts in achieving high quality, efficient programs and to achieve equity at the same time. No changes are proposed in this monograph related to this basic mission. The ambitious rural school reform agenda outlined above, however, suggests that modifications be made to the central goals of ESAs. The new pressures on rural districts, and those on public elementary-secondary education generally, also require that more ESAs pursue the twin goals of excellence and equity in a more disciplined, systemic way. These conditions suggest that ESAs accept such challenges and begin exercising a leadership role they are uniquely positioned to play in their regions and in the larger policy arena.

Specifically, educational service agencies can demonstrate a commitment to the broader vision held for them by pursuing three strategic goals:

1. enhancing the institutional capacity of rural districts to successfully address their school improvement agenda;
2. enhancing the ability of rural districts and their communities to successfully engage in a sustained school improvement process that will result in achievement of their school improvement agenda; and
3. exercising a leadership role for advancing education in the region that will impact school improvement efforts for all local districts, not just rural.

A discussion of each of the three proposed strategic goals is provided in the following three sections. Core objectives to achieve each strategic goal are also presented and briefly explained.

Strategic Goal 1. Enhancing the Institutional Capacity of Rural Districts

Educational service agencies are ideally positioned to serve as a first-line support system to enhance the institutional capacity of rural districts as they strive to respond to the school improvement agenda. The discussion of this goal is organized around the proposal of five core objectives that address common weaknesses while building on existing strengths in the institutional capacity of rural districts.

Core objective 1. Provide special student populations access

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to instructional programming and instructional support services not feasible at individual district site(s).

While still beset with numerous issues (e.g., the contemporary debate over inclusion), the progress made in providing access to students with disabilities is perhaps one of the greatest, but largely unheralded, success stories in the recent history of public education in this nation. In many states, much of this progress can be attributed to the efforts of ESAs. Though virtually all ESAs have for some time been involved in serving students with disabilities, there continues to be great variations in the nature and scope of programs and services (Fletcher, Cole, & Strumor, 1990; Stephens, 1979). For example, not all of the 13 categories of disability currently identified as eligible for services in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act appear to be provided access in many places.

Core objective 2. Provide general populations of students and adults access to instructional programming and support services not feasible at individual district site(s).

Rural districts face huge fiscal, staffing, and other obstacles in sponsoring programming and services–such as vocational/technical, occupational, gifted and talented, early childhood, outdoor/environmental, adult education, professional development, curriculum development, counseling and guidance, and health education. Particular attention is needed in the area of developing curriculum to meet content standards that have been developed in the majority of states.

Core objective 3. Promote access to appropriate use of telecommunication technologies that enhance teaching and learning not feasible at individual district site(s).

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 provides for access to advanced telecommunications services for all schools and libraries, as well as for rural health care providers. Rural districts need technical assistance and professional development on the appropriate use of available telecommunications technologies. There may also be a role for ESAs in supporting acquisition of equipment and services. In any case, sponsoring access to distance learning technologies and on-line communication may contribute to the "passing of remoteness" in the vast nonmetropolitan regions of the nation (Cleveland, 1985, p. 185).

Core objective 4. Promote cost saving practices and access to external funding sources that contribute to the efficient and effective use of district fiscal resources in support of teaching and learning.

This objective suggests an expansion of services ESAs already provide to rural districts. A few examples of possible activities include:

- sponsoring a comprehensive cooperative purchasing program;
- sponsoring money-flow studies of expenditure patterns;
- providing technical assistance in fiscal planning and management;
- developing information on the effects of new and existing federal and state funding practices;
- providing information on the availability of state, federal, and foundation grants; or
- providing technical assistance in grant writing.

Core objective 5. Promote comprehensive, timely assessments of student performance, and program and district effectiveness.

Current pressures to make all school districts–urban, suburban, and rural–accountable for the performance of their students will continue, if not accelerate, in the years ahead. Regardless of external pressures, rural districts need valid information on their students to inform efforts to improve their programs. ESAs could provide critically needed technical assistance and professional development to administer high quality assessments aligned with well-defined standards, and then to analyze the test results to inform teaching and learning.

Strategic Goal 2. Enhancing the Ability of Rural Districts and Communities to Engage in A School Improvement Process

The responsibility rests with local leadership for moving a rural community and its school district through the various phases of a strategic planning process. And because of the close relationship between rural communities and schools, there is little likelihood of progress in a rural school improvement process unless there is a parallel development effort going on at the community level. Complicating the matter is the frequent lack of management capacity in rural communities (Cigler, 1984). In this context, three core objectives are proposed to help strengthen the ability of rural districts and communities to address their improvement and development needs.

Core objective 1. Strengthen the capacity-building skills of district and community leadership engaged in all phases of strategic planning.

Using Honadale's (1980) definition, *capacity-building* means institu-

tionalizing (in public sector organizations) the ability to anticipate and influence external change impacting the organization, making informed policy choices, managing resources wisely, evaluating what the organization now does, and making appropriate planning decisions concerning the organization's future (p. 576). The rural district school improvement process outlined in the appendix provides a possible model for assisting districts as they begin a sustained effort to improve their schools.

Core objective 2. Provide technical assistance to assess the condition of a rural district and of a rural community that should then frame much of their strategic planning activities.

The critical analysis of both the internal and external environments can take several forms. At a minimum, it should probably consist of an assessment of the major strengths and weaknesses of services, programs, activities, and products that the rural district currently provides; a competition analysis; a stakeholder's analysis; a threat analysis; an opportunity analysis; and planning assumptions based on the one internal and four external assessments. ESA staff could help with the selection and use of appropriate methodologies for conducting these various analyses.

Core objective 3. Provide independent, third-party assessments of implementation activities undertaken by the district.

Educational service agency staff are in an ideal position to play this needed role. They ordinarily will be knowledgeable about the overall processes, yet they will not be too vested in particular outcomes to maintain a balanced perspective.

Strategic Goal 3. Provide Leadership for the Advancement of Education in the Region

Leadership roles to be performed by educational service agencies in the region are reflected in the core objectives cited below. These expectations are admittedly demanding, but so too are the public and political calls for all responsible parties to devote their energies to improving public education for all students. Educational service agencies that rise to these challenges will contribute substantially to the advancement of all districts–rural, urban, and suburban–in their regions.

Core objective 1. Create, and then fervently nourish, regional communities of learners within the education community and also among educational and other public and private

human services providers for the purpose of sharing common professional interests to advance education in the region.

This could entail helping create time for teachers to reflect with other teachers and support personnel on new approaches to facilitate student learning, using computer networking to access expert advice and research findings on exemplary practices, and providing opportunities to observe effective practices teachers and administrators want to know more about (Hawley, 1994). Researchers have described the value of networking in promoting change in schools (National Network of Regional Educational Laboratories, 1995; Olson, 1994). ESAs could play a vital role in establishing and nourishing such networks of educators–organized by special interest, grade level, or in collaboration with community members–on a regional basis.

Core objective 2. Create, and then fervently nourish, a critical mass of individuals from both the public and private sectors to serve in an alliance dedicated to the advancement of education and community development in the region.

This objective urges the creation of a critical mass of individuals representing organizations, institutions, local governments, and private citizens dedicated to advancing education in the broadest sense, which in turn creates additional human resources available for community development.

Core objective 3. Serve as an advocate for the advancement of education in the region.

Some activities in support of this objective would be focused within the region (e.g., by providing periodic reports on the condition of education in the region, providing access to the timely monitoring of federal and state legislative activity in education, or conducting forums or other meetings on contemporary or projected policy issues impacting education in the region). Other activities would be directed outside of the region (e.g., writing articles or making presentations for state and national publications and conferences about exemplary educational practices taking place in the region).

Core objective 4. Serve as a prototype educational organization in the region committed to the promotion of high standards of quality and effectiveness and subject to rigorous standards of accountability in its own operations.

An ESA can contribute to "habits of mind" in a variety of ways that

together facilitate to the advancement of education in its service region. For example, an ESA could establish advisory groups to help direct major program and service clusters; implement principles of total quality management; or commission external evaluations of agency effectiveness. These are only a few of the ways that an ESA could demonstrate through its own operations a commitment to high standards.

Conclusion: Capitalizing on the Synergistic Qualities of an ESA

It is in the leadership roles envisioned here for an ESA that organizations of this type can capitalize on the potentially powerful synergistic qualities they possess. The cross-walking of their expertise in content areas central to school improvement with their expertise in the processes needed to achieve these goals can result in a strong and bold voice–and action–for the advancement of education in the region.

An educational service agency, of course, cannot alone stem the ongoing socioeconomic and political forces impacting rural communities and their school districts. However, they can and must fully exercise their potential to help ensure that the playing field is level–as the transformation in rural America continues. That is, they can help ensure the challenge is met that, "all schools nurture the talents of all who enter their door." (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, pg. 209, 1995).

Moreover, and as equally critical, the positioning of an ESA to take full advantage of its synergistic qualities will make important contributions to the strengthening of public education–which continues to be under serious attack in many quarters–with some attacks fully warranted, some not. Boyer (1993) reminds all who will listen:

> The nation's public schools collectively remain one of America's most vital institutions, with the mission of sustaining a democratic nation as well as serving the individual. When all is said and done, we dare not permit the current debate about choice to blur this vision. The goal must be to make every public school a source of national strength in pursuit of *excellence for all*. We must choose nothing less (p. xiv).

Many circumstances seem to have converged, which suggests that the leadership role outlined here would not just be well received, but enthusiastically welcomed. These circumstances include the apparent long-term downsizing of both federal and state governments, as well as the greater acceptance that many school districts–urban, suburban, and rural alike–clearly cannot nor should not go it alone and therefore must reach out and seek collaboration with others. The window of

opportunity available to ESAs to step forward is not likely to be more open.

Appendix Summary

Developing a Rural District School Improvement Process

Extensive literature based on recent work in the social and behavioral sciences provides many insights into the school improvement process. Especially useful is the knowledge base on organizational change and culture, factors affecting organizational development, and conditions that foster the adoption of innovations in educational organizations. This work has led to 12 lessons learned related to the *process* of school improvement:

1. There is not at this time, nor is there ever likely to be, a generic process that fits the needs of all local school districts equally well.
2. The process must be based on a plan, though hyperrational planning often leads to failure.
3. Overloading the process will result in paralysis; the way to minimize this outcome is to provide participants a comprehensive framework that stresses the systemic and incremental nature of the effort.
4. The process must promote strategic thinking on the part of participants.
5. The process must be viewed as a journey, not an end.
6. The process must be viewed as nonlinear, with appropriate checks and balances in place to assess whether or not the journey is proceeding as planned and on schedule.
7. The process must enjoy the unwavering commitment and active participation of key internal stakeholders who must always believe they have ownership.
8. The process, as well as the substantive content, must be compatible with the participants' values.
9. The process must be sensitive to, and make accommodation for, common barriers to institutional change that could affect how change is to occur.

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10. There must be external pressure for a district to initiate a school improvement process on the scale required to address the agenda envisioned.
11. The process must provide for enhancing the quality of the work of participants through enriching networking experiences.
12. Most local school districts, regardless of size or available human or fiscal resources, need technical assistance to engage in a systemic reform process.

While these lessons or propositions can be applied nearly anywhere people are organizing themselves to effect school change, there are two modifications to them that further facilitate change in rural school systems. The first modification adds the community to the seventh proposition, so it reads, "The process must enjoy the unwavering commitment and active participation of key internal stakeholders *and those in the rural community* who must always believe they have ownership." The other modification alters proposition 12 to read, "*All rural* local school districts need technical assistance to engage in a process that will lead to the systemic reform that they choose to follow."

While these lessons are useful in understanding the process of school change in rural areas, implementation involves another set of considerations. Among the multitude of strategic planning and implementation models that have been developed over the years, two approaches fit closely with the propositions outlined above. These are the approaches advocated by Cook (1988) and Lewis (1983). Based on these models and field testing by the author, a rural school improvement process ESAs could employ in their work moves through five phases:

Phase 1. Get started. Key decisions and actions that should occur in phase 1 include

- securing the commitment of the governing board to the process and to the earmarking of staff and fiscal resources;
- selecting a school improvement steering committee composed of a cross section of the community, district staff, and students;
- appointing subcommittees by the steering committee in each of the key areas of the school improvement agenda (e.g., access for special populations of students), or some logical combination of two or more key areas of the agenda; and
- establishing the roles, expectations, and tentative time lines for the work of the steering committee and each subcommittee.

Phase 2. Develop the strategic plan. This is the heart of the school improvement process. Many decisions and actions take place in phase 2, including

- establishing a guidance system consisting of a statement of beliefs and a mission statement, both centering on the district's intentions regarding its school improvement agenda;
- developing practical, useful, and enforceable strategic policies that define things the school district will never do and always do;
- conducting a critical analysis to identify, analyze, and evaluate the key trends, factors, forces, and other phenomena both within and outside the organization that have the potential to impact the previously agreed-to belief and mission statements;
- generating written, long-range goals that are specific, measurable tasks designated for the district to complete over a long time period, usually 5 years;
- establishing short-range objectives or statements of results to be achieved, usually within a 1-year period;
- establishing flexible and broad strategies that explain how the rural district will use resources to achieve its goals and objectives, thus fulfilling the mission of the district;
- developing detailed descriptions of the specific actions required by the rural district and community to implement the strategies;
- establishing planning controls that will provide both information and corrective action when that which is occurring is not what was intended; and
- developing an evaluation plan that provides comprehensive, valid, and timely information on all aspects of the strategic plan.

Phase 3. Implement the action plan. Key decisions and actions that should occur in phase 3 include the intensive training of staff expected to take lead roles in the implementation of the agenda and the provision of adequate human and fiscal resources to ensure that the action plans will be implemented.

Phase 4. Monitor the implementation plan. Key decisions and actions that should occur in this phase include establishing a reliable and timely reporting system for reviewing implementation activities. Further important actions include establishing procedures for conducting summative evaluation and for taking corrective actions for poorly performing activities.

Phase 5. Institutionalize the school improvement plan. Key decisions and actions that should occur in this phase include developing governing board policies, companion administrative rules and regulations, and the reallocation of human and fiscal resources that are necessary to support the agenda.

–Summary by Patricia Cahape Hammer

About the Author

E. Robert Stephens, Ph.D., is currently the director of the Institute for Regional and Rural Studies in Education, Edmond, Oklahoma, and professor emeritus, University of Maryland, College Park.

From 1972 to 1994, he served as a professor at the Department of Education Policy, Planning, and Administration, the University of Maryland, College Park. Before that, he served on the faculty of The Division of Educational Administration, The University of Iowa (1966-72). His experiences other than in institutions of higher education include one year as Special Consultant to the Administrator of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Administration, Washington, D.C. (1971-72) while on leave from The University of Iowa; and twelve years as a social science teacher, principal, and superintendent of schools in three Iowa public school districts (1952-64).

The recipient of numerous awards, Stephens has also served as an officer in several national and statewide professional organizations. His teaching and research interests include: the study of the structure and governance of education at the local, state, and federal levels; education policy studies; school-intergovernmental relations, inter-organizational collaboration in education; and, education in a rural setting. He has served as director and principal investigator for a number of major research projects including those on the following topics: state systems of educational service agencies; state planning for the multi-use of public facilities; public-private coalition planning for health, welfare, and educational services; planning a state system of community colleges; and education programs for veterans. His writing and publications include thirteen books and monographs, approximately fifty technical studies, five chapters, and approximately thirty-five articles in professional journals.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Historians who chronicle the evolution of America's great experiment with universal public education undoubtedly will note that the period spanning much of the decade of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s represents one of this nation's most ambitious and prolonged efforts to improve public elementary-secondary education. Concerns about the quality of basic education raised after the launching of Russia's Sputnik in 1957, for example, or the controversies that both preceded and followed the "Great Society" education programs in the mid to late 1960s pale in comparison to the recent debate. This same observation could be made concerning other reform movements that have characterized much of the history of public education. Not only are the current efforts to advance public education unusual in their longevity and intensity, but the direction of the proposed solutions have changed dramatically since the release in the early 1980s of the U.S. Department of Education report *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, Larsen, Baker, & Campbell, 1983), a widely used benchmark for the beginnings of the contemporary reform movement. The discourse on reform has moved through three relatively distinct waves, or periods.

The now familiar first wave spanned the approximate period from the mid to late 1980s. State-imposed, top-down requirements on a broad range of topics dominated this era (e.g., the strengthening of existing or establishment of new graduation requirements, the enactment of new and more comprehensive school accreditation standards, more selective requirements for teacher preparation programs).

The second wave, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, was a call for restructuring–"a change in a social system's structure, its patterns of rules, roles, relationships . . . to produce substantially different results . . ." (Corbett, 1990). Tyack (1990) observed that "restructuring has become a magic incantation," similar in popularity to "excellence" in the early 1980s or "equity" in the 1960s (p. 170). With this popularity also came different interpretation about what restructuring meant. Discrepancies were so apparent that Elmore (1990) observed that "school restructuring has many of the characteristics of what political and organizational theorists call a garbage can" (p. 4).

No such ambiguity is evident in the centerpieces of the third, and present phase, popularly labeled the systemic reform movement. One core proposition of this movement is to develop coordinated policy at all levels of government that will result in fundamental change in the educational system. Though states continue to approach systemic reform in different ways, the priorities most focused on include developing student performance assessments aligned with content standards; establishing comprehensive staff development to prepare teachers to respond to curricular change and assessment practices; and school-level decision making, including the greater engagement of parents in their student's school experience. Though there appears to be a consensus in the policy communities that a focus on these core priorities will result in school improvement, there are of course many planning and implementation issues surrounding the core priorities that are yet unresolved. This seems to be especially true concerning the development of content standards.

Nonetheless, it would appear that the direction of the systemic reform movement is fairly well outlined. The dominant vision endorses the development of integrated, cohesive state and local policies that incorporate "the vitality and creativity of bottom-up change at the school site with an enabling supportive structure at more centralized levels of the system" (Smith & O'Day, 1991, p. 245). These policies are directed at all public school systems regardless of locale–city, urban fringe, large town, small town, or rural. With this approach, Lewis (1995) points out that

> ". . .teachers and students should not assume that the standards movement is for some and not for others . . . no one will be able to wiggle out of this effort" (p. 746).

The nation's rural school systems, then, can be expected to be full partners in the school reform movement as it is presently being implemented. This is as it should be. Concerns about their ability to do so, however, are clearly warranted. It is true that a number of the myths

concerning the quality of rural education have been exposed in recent years.[1] It is also true that there is a new appreciation of the numerous strengths many rural systems bring to teaching and learning. Nonetheless, it is also clear that there are severe structural and organizational problems in the education infrastructure in the vast nonmetropolitan regions of the nation. It would be a disservice to rural education interests and others to suggest otherwise and hold out the false hope that somehow with luck and pluck rural districts can respond effectively to the new higher expectations faced by all of public education. Ignoring the special requirements of rural districts to be full partners in school improvement will most assuredly have severe, if not fatal, consequences for the ultimate success of any national or state level school improvement strategy, no matter how meritorious.

The Significance of Rural Education: One More Time

Attention must be given to rural education if school improvement strategies now underway are to have potential success on the scale envisioned in this nation. Dramatic decreases in the number of rural districts have, of course, occurred during much of this century as America moved from a predominantly rural to an urban, then metropolitan, society. Most of the huge reductions in the number of public school districts that have occurred since the U.S. Department of Education began tracking this statistic–from 119,001 in 1937-38 to 15,358 in 1990-91 (Snyder, 1993, p. 56)–involved the discontinuance of rural systems, most of them one-teacher schools (from 121,178 in 1937-38 to 617 in 1990-91).[2] Rural districts, however, have most assuredly not disappeared from the landscape of public education. In fact, they remain an important, not fringe, component of the public school universe in many state systems, even in some of the most urbanized states.

Nationally, the continued significance of rural systems can be established through four conventional measures of relative importance: (1) the percent of all public school districts that are rural, (2) the percent of all public schools located in communities designated as a rural locale by the U.S. Census Bureau, (3) the percent of all elementary-secondary public school students enrolled in these systems, and (4) the percent of the nation's public school professional staff employed by these rural systems.

The most reliable data on these four measures available at present are included in *The Condition of Education in Rural Schools* (Stern, 1994), a congressionally mandated report issued by the Office of Educational

Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. E. L. Elder (1994), a rural sociologist at the University of Missouri-Columbia, authored the chapter reporting on these data. The approach Elder used is the most useful of the numerous attempts undertaken over the years to establish the parameters of rural education in this nation. Elder defined a rural district as one where 75 percent or more of the students attended a regular public school located in a community with a ZIP Code designated by the Census Bureau as a rural locale. His conservative counts for each of the four measures for 1990 are the following:

- rural districts represented nearly one-half (47.2 percent) of the nation's approximately 15,000 public school districts;
- rural schools represented slightly less than one-fourth (22.3 percent) of the nation's approximately 80,000 schools;
- rural schools and rural districts enrolled slightly less than one of eight (11.8 percent) of the nearly 40 million public school students; and
- these districts employed slightly more than one of eight (13.4 percent) of the 2.2 million public school staff. (pp. 13-19)

Elder's calculations of the number of rural districts in many state systems of elementary-secondary education are even more impressive and are shown in table 1. His breakthrough design should also put to rest a number of long-standing myths regarding the location of rural systems. One of the most damaging of these is the widely held perception that rural schools are located only in the hinterlands of this country. In fact, a substantial number are to be found in metropolitan counties as well, much of those in New Jersey, one of the most urbanized states. More students attended rural schools in New Jersey in 1990 than in Montana, one of the nation's most rural states. The New Jersey rural students are not counted as attending a rural school in many federal government reports that classify counties as either metropolitan (or urban), and all remaining counties as nonmetropolitan (or rural).

This brief statistical profile of four measures used to justify the claim that rural districts are significant ought to stand as irrefutable evidence that what occurs or does not occur in rural school systems in responding to the new, more rigorous direction of the school reform movement will, to a large extent, determine the outcome of the hoped-for changes. Sher (1994) recently argued for the significance of rural education in this way:

Table 1
Percent Rural Districts in State School Systems, 1989-90

Percent Rural Districts*	Number of States	States and Percent Rural Districts**
91-100	1	North Dakota (92)
81-90	4	Kansas (82), Montana (85), South Dakota (85), Alaska (82)
71-80	2	Minnesota (71), Nebraska (72)
61-70	7	Vermont (65), Iowa (70), Missouri (67), Arkansas (64), Oklahoma (64), Colorado (63), Idaho (64)
51-60	5	Maine (55), Wisconsin (54), Texas (54), New Mexico (55), Washington (57)
41-50	4	New Hampshire (43), Mississippi (44), Nevada (41), Wyoming (47)
31-40	11	Delaware (37), Illinois (39), Indiana (34), Michigan (36), Ohio (40), Virginia (40), West Virginia (40), Kentucky (35), Arizona (40), Utah (35), Oregon (38)
21-30	6	New York (27), Georgia (29), North Carolina (28), South Carolina (29), Tennessee (21), California (27)
11-20	8	Connecticut (14), Massachusetts (13), Maryland (17), New Jersey (12), Pennsylvania (20), Florida (13), Alabama (19), Louisiana (12)
1-10	1	Rhode Island (8)
0	1	Hawaii

* Rural districts are those systems where 75 percent or more of the students attend a regular public school located in a rural locale.

** Percent rounded to nearest whole number.

Source: Elder, W. L. (1994). Location and characteristics of rural schools and school districts. (Table 8). In J. D. Stern (Ed.), *The condition of education in rural schools.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

> Imagine for a moment a set of *national* education policies that failed to take into account the realities of any school district located east of the Mississippi River. Then imagine a *national* school improvement program that excluded all schools operating in the states of New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Texas and California. And finally, imagine a *national* study of actual classroom teaching and learning that neglected every minority-group teacher and every African-American student in the entire U.S. (p. 7)

Continued Sher:

> Any sensible person would regard such activities as notably unrepresentative of American education. And yet, America's rural schools are overlooked at the national level in just such a manner. There are more school districts within rural America than within the entire eastern half of the nation. There are more schools across rural America than exist in the five most populous states combined. There are more rural teachers than minority-group teachers in America today. And, there are more rural students than African-American students in U.S. public schools. (p. 7)

Sher's method for defining a rural school is less precise than the one used here ("it draws the vast majority of its students from communities located outside the boundaries of any of the U.S. Census Bureau Standard Metropolitan Statistics Areas," p.7). It is also more conservative. Nonetheless, his example remains a powerful way to illustrate the continuing importance of rural education.

Serving Rural Districts One of the Primary Goals of ESAs

Statewide networks of educational service agencies (ESAs) designed to serve all local school districts exist in nearly half of the 50 state systems of elementary-secondary education. A virtual statewide system of service agencies presently operates in a few additional states, where approximately three-fourths or more of all local districts hold membership and are eligible to receive programs and services offered by a service unit. Collaboratives, consortia, cooperatives, and clusters involving two or more neighboring local districts–but not statewide in scope–exist in most states. The actual number of arrangements of this type operating in the nation in any given year is unknown, but probably ranges in the several thousands.

State-recognized and state-encouraged educational service agencies

are designed to either promote collaboration among local districts in a substate region or serve as a conduit for the implementation of state regulatory requirements or state-supported initiatives, or achieve both of these policy goals. These differences in intended function tend to be reflected in their structural, organizational, and programming features. A typology developed in the late 1970s (Stephens, 1979) classified the state networks then in existence into one of three basic types: Type A, Special District ESAs; Type B, Regionalized SEA/ESA; and Type C, Cooperative ESAs. The typology was based on over 100 characteristics of the existing statewide systems. These characteristics addressed the complexities of the external environment within which the units functioned, their mode of operation, and their products, all widely acknowledged objectives of taxonomic efforts to understand similarities and differences among and between organizations. An overview of the dominant patterns of these three basic forms of educational service agencies, judged to have continuing utility, has been demonstrated by Stephens (1979) and is shown in table 2 (page 8). The four central characteristics highlighted relate to the legal framework, governance, program and service orientation, and fiscal support.

Many statewide networks of educational service agencies were initially designed to address the specialized needs of school districts in the state regardless of size of enrollment or locale–city, urban fringe, large or small town, or rural. In many states, however, the provision of programs and services to rural school districts was uppermost in the minds of those advocating the formation of the state network. In these cases, serving rural systems became the explicit *raison d'etre* for the initial support for the system, or doing so was clearly implied in the initial mission statements developed to guide the implementation of the networks. Cubberley (1922) was one of the earliest advocates who envisioned a regional service agency as the key to providing leadership in rural education, as did other later writers (Cooper & Fitzwater, 1954; Isenberg, 1954; McClure, 1956). McPherran's (1954) support for the creation of a regional service agency to serve newly reorganized rural districts was typical of the prevailing view of many that the huge reorganization of rural systems taking place in many states in the 1950s would still leave rural districts vulnerable.

> Even after the completion of effective programs of school district reorganization, however, the majority of local school districts will be unable to provide a complete educational program, including specialized educational services, on an economically sound basis. Many services are too costly for small local school districts to provide for themselves. An intermediate school district, by serving

Table 2
Dominant Patterns of Types of ESAs with Regard to Four Central Characteristics

	Four Central Characteristics			
Type of ESA	Legal Framework	Governance	Program and Services	Fiscal Support
Type A: Special District ESA	tends to be highly structured in legislation and/or SEA regulations	tends to be lay control	tends to be determined by member LEAs and the SEA or by statute	tends to be a mix of local, regional, state and state/federal
Type B: Regionalized SEA/ESA	tends to be structured in SEA regulations only	tends to be professional advisory only	tends to be almost exclusively determined by SEA	tends to be almost exclusively state and state/federal
Type C: Cooperative ESA	tends to be general (i.e., intergovernmental regulations and statutes) and/or permissive legislation	tends to be composed of representatives of member LEAs	tends to be almost exclusively determined by member LEAs	tends to be almost exclusively local and state/federal

Source: Stephens, E.R., Bensimon, G.A., McAdoo, T.P., & Gividen, N.J. (1979). *Major policy issues surrounding the educational service agency movement and a proposed research and development agenda.* Burtonsville, MD: Stephens Associates, p. 3.

> a number of small local school districts, will be able to provide them at a reasonable cost. (p. 295)

Strong support for an intermediate type educational agency to provide services to local school districts was also received from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), which, beginning in the mid 1950s, adopted a series of resolutions advocating their creation. Isenberg (1967) reported that the first AASA action on this topic occurred in 1954, over 40 years ago.

> The Association believes that intermediate administrative positions are essential in the provision of adequate educational opportunities. It commends state associations of county superintendents, colleges and universities, state legislatures, and the Commission on the Intermediate Unit of School Administration for the efforts being made to improve the quality of educational leadership provided through the intermediate district superintendency. (Resolution No. 4)

Moreover, this same rationale appears to be a driving force for the continued support of many of the networks. In a recent piece that attempted to classify extraordinary state policy strategies used to assist rural districts, for example, I offered the observation that five of the nine strategies cited would result in:

> . . . some form of collaboration among rural districts in order to create a more favorable critical mass of students, specialized personnel, or resources is clearly the state strategy of choice, though different ways of achieving this goal are currently practiced. (Stephens, 1992, p. 37)[3]

Objectives of the Paper

Five objectives are pursued in this paper. First, a view of the school improvement agenda confronting rural districts is provided in order to establish the nature of the expectations that systems of this type must meet if they are to remain viable educational enterprises in the future (chapter 2). The second objective is to provide a profile of institutional strengths and weaknesses of rural districts to engage in a school improvement process required to address the reform agenda expected of them (chapter 3). The intent of both of these objectives is to establish a framework that will serve as a guide to meaningful ways ESAs can assist their rural school constituencies.

A third objective is to provide a perspective on a rural school improvement process that is likely to be most effective in assisting rural systems in their improvement efforts (chapter 4). This is followed by a profile of the current ways that ESAs provide assistance to rural districts (chapter 5). The intent here is to establish which of these can continue to make contributions and thus ought to be retained and strengthened, and what present activities are not given, and, all things being equal, ought to be given serious consideration for substantial downsizing or total phasing out.[4]

A fifth objective is to describe what roles ESAs are typically in a unique position to play in enhancing rural school improvement efforts, along with the arguments used to advance this preferred ESA role. This objective is pursued by first establishing important modifications that ought to be made in the central purposes of an educational service agency, and then by identifying three strategic goals for these agencies that, if adopted, will place them in a meaningful first-line supportive role (chapter 6). Each of the three strategic goals is then developed in subsequent sections: enhancing the institutional capacity of rural districts (chapter 7), enhancing the ability of rural districts and their communities to engage in a school improvement process (chapter 8), and how an ESA can provide further leadership for advancement of education in its region (chapter 9). In the development of each of the three strategic goals, a template, not a detailed road map, is provided of the courses of action that ESAs should take.

The approaches used to achieve these five objectives will leave room for debate, especially the critical discussions of my perceptions of the rural school improvement agenda, the design of the profile of the existing institutional capacity of rural districts, and the perspective of the rural school improvement process. Other conceptualizations and methodological approaches used to develop additional sections of the paper are also likely to be controversial, influenced as they are, and perhaps must always be, by the world view I bring to this assignment.

Types of State Networks of ESAs Examined

Two criteria, both of which had to be satisfied, were used to select the state systems of ESAs concentrated on in this paper:

- The ESAs that comprise the state network must have a substantial local school district presence in either their governance, the determination of their programs and sources, or in funding arrangements, that is required by statute.

- The state network must serve at least three-fourths of local school districts in the state.

The first criterion ensures that the ESAs included in this discussion satisfy the membership qualifications of the American Association of Educational Service Agencies (AAESA), the only national professional association devoted exclusively to furthering the interests of service-type organizations in the field of education. For a number of years, AAESA has defined an educational service agency as one that is ". . . created primarily for the purpose of providing educational services to multiple local education agencies" (AAESA, Bylaws, 1994, p. 2).

Importantly, the use of the first criterion also means the inclusion of ESAs that satisfy language in newly enacted federal legislation reauthorizing the Elementary-Secondary Education Act of 1965: "Educational service agency means regional public multiservice agencies authorized by State statute to develop, manage, and provide services or programs to local education agencies" (U.S. Congress Educate America Act of 1994).

Furthermore, the use of the first criterion excludes regionalized SEA/ESA state networks that were identified and included as part of the earlier Stephens typology. Though a number of these types of networks appear to be originally designed to provide statewide coverage (as in Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee), local school district involvement in the decision-making processes of the agencies is relatively limited. Moreover, network funding tends to be exclusively state derived. The second criterion excludes what is thought to be a relatively large number of cooperatives, collaboratives, and clusters found in virtually all states, but not organized on a statewide basis.

Twenty-one state networks satisfy both criteria and thus serve as the primary areas of interest here.[5] The official title of these systems, the year of their initial establishment, the number of units in the network, and their designation as either a Special District (Type A) or Cooperative (Type C) network are shown in table 3 (p. 12).

Table 3
State Systems of ESA Concentrated On in this Paper

State	Title of Units	Year Established	Type*	Number of Units 1994-95
1. Arkansas	Educational Service Cooperatives	1985	C	15
2. California	County Office of Education	1959	A	58
3. Colorado	Board of Cooperative Educational Services	1965	C	18
4. Connecticut	Regional Educational Service Center	1976	C	6
5. Georgia	Cooperative Education Service Agency	1966	A	16
6. Illinois	Regional Office of Education	1975	A	45
7. Indiana	Educational Service Center	1976	C	9
8. Iowa	Area Education Agency	1975	A	15
9. Massachusetts	Educational Collaborative	1974	C	36
10. Michigan	Intermediate School District	1962	A	57
11. Minnesota	Educational Cooperative Service Unit	1976	C	10
12. Missouri	Regional Service Professional Development Center	1994	C	10
13. Nebraska	Educational Service Unit	1967	C	19
14. New York	Boards of Cooperative Educational Services	1948	A	38
15. Ohio	County Office of Education	1914	A	88
16. Oregon	Education Service District	1963	A	29
17. Pennsylvania	Intermediate Units	1970	A	29
18. Texas	Education Service Centers	1967	A	20
19. Washington	Regional Educational Service Agency	1969	A	9
20. West Virginia	Regional Educational Service Agency	1972	A	8
21. Wisconsin	Cooperative Educational Service Agency	1965	A	12
			Total	547

* Key: A - Special District ESA; C - Cooperative ESA

CHAPTER 2

The Rural School District Improvement Agenda

Considered below are the core features of the school improvement agenda that rural districts are expected to achieve. The agenda outlined is both ambitious and demanding, originating as it does from a variety of sources. Parts of the agenda spring from ongoing legislative action in many states; other parts come from judicial decisions that continue to shape education policy and practice. These and other influences have helped shape common expectations of rural school districts. Three themes frame this discussion of the rural school improvement agenda:

- the relatively recent expansions of the concept of equal educational opportunity;
- the ongoing national and state policy initiatives that started in earnest in the early 1980s; and
- the pressures outside the policy communities or legal system that, if implemented, have the potential to greatly expand the mission of the rural district.

An overview of the key features of each of these themes is provided in figure 1. The discussion of the features in each of the three themes is obviously not exhaustive. Rather, the intent is to justify their inclusion as part of the rural school improvement agenda being sketched here. First, though, it is important to establish what is judged to be one of the primary precipitating causes for much of the interest in school improvement–the relatively recent progress being made in understanding the characteristics of schools that are effective.

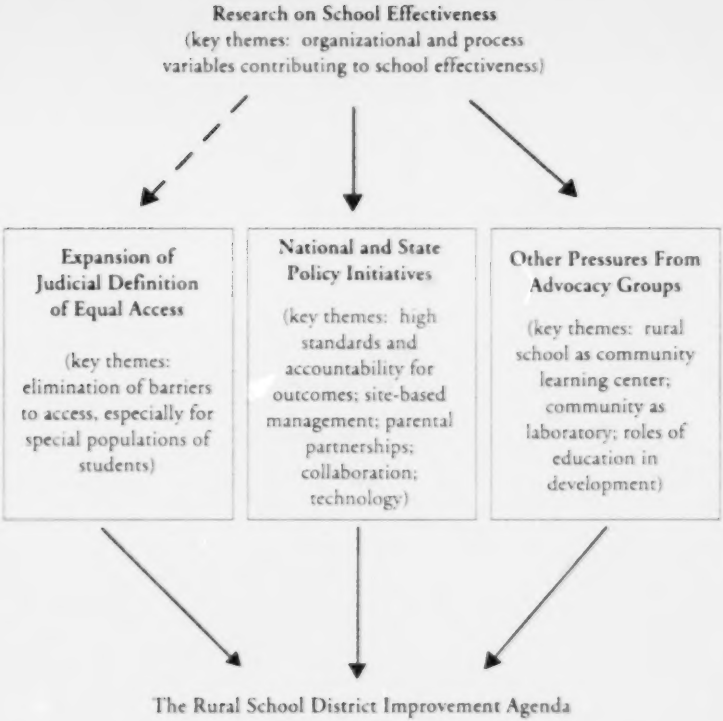
Research on School Effectiveness
(key themes: organizational and process variables contributing to school effectiveness)
Expansion of Judicial Definition of Equal Access
(key themes: elimination of barriers to access, especially for special populations of students)
National and State Policy Initiatives
(key themes: high standards and accountability for outcomes; site-based management; parental partnerships; collaboration; technology)
Other Pressures From Advocacy Groups
(key themes: rural school as community learning center; community as laboratory; roles of education in development)
The Rural School District Improvement Agenda
Key: —— direct influence
— — less direct influence, but still significant, especially in a number of recent court decisions making use of an adequacy criterion

Figure 1. An Overview of The Key Origins of Developments Framing the Rural School Improvement Agenda

Influence of Research on School Effectiveness

The research on effective schools has had a huge influence in shaping the direction of national and state policy initiatives launched in the past few years that are presently central features of the rural school improvement agenda. The now voluminous literature on the characteristics of effective schools began in earnest in the late 1960s and accelerated through much of the 1970s and 1980s. The intensive efforts to examine characteristics of effective schools were based on certain assumptions that Grady, Wayson, and Zirkel (1989) articulated: first, that some schools are unusually effective in teaching poor and minority children basic skills as measured by standardized tests; second, that successful schools exhibited certain manipulable characteristics; and third, that these characteristics could provide a basis for improving other schools.

In capturing the main conclusions emanating from the large number of studies to be found in the school effectiveness literature, Edmonds (1979) concluded that differences in the effectiveness among schools can be accounted for by five factors that he argued represent five correlates of effective schools: (1) strong leadership by the principal in instructional matters, (2) a safe and orderly school climate free of drugs and vandalism problems, (3) an understanding by the staff that basic skills instruction is the primary goal of the school, (4) teacher expectations that all students can achieve at least a minimum mastery, and (5) the presence of a system to monitor and assess pupil achievement that is aligned with instructional objectives (pp. 15-27).

A second synthesis was completed by Purkey and Smith (1983), who reviewed more than 100 studies that made use of a variety of research designs. They argued organizational/structural variables and process variables characterized effective schools. Nine organizational/structural variables were cited: (1) school-site management, (2) leadership, (3) staff stability, (4) curriculum articulation and organization, (5) staff development, (6) parental involvement, (7) school-wide recognition of academic success, (8) maximized learning time, and (9) district support. Four process variables were noted: (1) collaborative planning and collegial relationships, (2) sense of community, (3) clear goals and high expectations commonly shared, and (4) order and discipline. On the association of the two set of variables, Purkey and Smith stated that:

> While the characteristics are interdependent, certain ones seem logically to form a framework or first group composed of organizational and structural variables that can be set into place by

> administrative and bureaucratic means. They precede and facilitate the development of the second group of variables. The second group of variables can be labeled, somewhat loosely, as "process variables." Taken together these variables define the climate and culture of the school–characteristics that need to grow organically in a school and are not directly susceptible to bureaucratic manipulation. (p. 443)

The early research on school effectiveness was not without its critics. Especially strong views have been raised regarding the exclusive use in many studies of outcome measures to establish success, the applicability of studies done primarily at elementary sites (Firestone & Herriott, 1982), and the unusual importance placed on the individual school as the unit of analysis with not enough attention given the role of district officials (Mace-Matluck, 1987).

Nonetheless, and these types of concerns notwithstanding, the research on school effectiveness subsequently influenced greatly both national and state policy initiatives that have attempted to initialize many of the conclusions reached in these studies. Moreover, it can also be said that the same lines of research likely have impacted a number of recent court decisions that make use of an adequacy criterion in the determination of whether or not a state funding practice serves as a barrier to equal access to educational opportunity. It is for these reasons that the research literature of effective schools must be recognized as a major contributor to the conception of the rural school improvement agenda.

Expansion of The Concept of Equal Educational Opportunity

Throughout the history of public education, court decisions have greatly influenced educational policy and practice. Certainly one of the principal sources of litigation in recent decades surrounds the concept of equal educational opportunity. Though a universally accepted definition of the construct continues to remain elusive, court decisions over the past quarter of a century have dramatically expanded the concept. These extensions represent an important part of the rural school improvement agenda. Court decisions are thus a critical part of any meaningful consideration of the rural school improvement agenda.

In an earlier piece (Stephens, 1992), I cited the following examples

of the emergence of legal principals that have sought to expand the concept of equal educational opportunity.

> . . .eliminate race as a determinant of access (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954*); apply due process rights protected by the U.S. Constitution to students and teachers (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, 1969*); eliminate local wealth as a determinant of access (e.g., *Serrano v. Priest, 1971; Robinson v. Cahill, 1972; Horton v. Meskill, 1977; Dupress v. Alma School District, 1983*); render as unacceptable a handicapping condition as a determinant of access (e.g., *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth, 1971*); repudiate local wealth in urban districts as a determinant (e.g., *Abbott v. Burke, 1990*); eliminate gender as a determinant of access (Title IX); reduce geography as a determinant of access; and, introduce an adequacy criterion as a second standard by which to judge equality of opportunity (e.g., *Rose v. The Council for Better Education, Inc., 1989*).

The latest chapter in statutory efforts at the federal level to address equity issues is including opportunity-to-learn standards in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 (Stedman, 1994). Supporters of this move, who ultimately had to accept scaled-down language to ensure its inclusion in the bill, argued in part that it would be unfair to promote curricular-content and student-performance standards, yet make no provision that students who are expected to achieve these standards have the opportunity to do so. This line of argument is similar in many ways to the use of an adequacy criterion in several recent court cases questioning the constitutionality of state funding policies. There does not appear to be a retrenchment from the series of precedent court cases in recent years that have broadened the legal definition of equal educational opportunity, especially for special populations of students. Moreover, judicial rulings are likely to take on even greater weight in the future. Wood (1995) noted this probability:

> the courts will become the conveyors and policy makers of public education because the various state legislatures have abdicated their responsibilities for setting education finance policies, particularly in the arena of distribution of state resources to all the residents of a given state (p. 31).

Pipho's (1994) review of recent court decisions in Alabama, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Ohio would seem to support Wood's assertion. In his summary of these cases, all decided in the past 5 years, Pipho emphasized that all four states established a curriculum prescription for the state's constitutional mandate to provide an education, and thus "in effect giving a curricular meaning to the underpinnings of the

finance formula" (p. 14). The specifications of student outcomes in these four cases, according to Pipho, may shape education reform in these states, ". . .far more than the National Education Goals, regional accreditation standards, higher-education entry standards or reform models developed by prestigious education leaders" (p. 14).

Ongoing National and State Policy Initiatives

Key features of national and state policy initiatives that have had a major impact on how one should define the rural school improvement agenda include those that call for the achievement of high standards in the outcomes of schooling, promote site-based management, encourage more extensive professional development, promote parental involvement and choice, provide motivation for the development of education partnerships, and foster the greater use of telecommunications and information-age technologies.

Most of these policy initiatives are of relatively recent origin. Many have their genesis in the school effectiveness literature that in turn influenced the restructuring movement and the systemic reform movement. These developments thus stand as evidence that on occasion, and contrary to a popular view, social science research does in fact influence public policy. Federal fiscal incentives have also been instrumental in causing states to include many of these topics as part of their reform initiatives. It is important to note, though, that not all rural systems in all states are equally affected by all of these policy initiatives, nor is it likely they will be in the future, if states are given greater discretionary authority to use federal funds.

Achievement of High Standards

Several major recent policy initiatives are attempts to achieve two policy goals: higher standards in elementary-secondary education and a more rigorous accountability system to monitor progress made toward reaching the higher standards.

Eight national education goals have now been institutionalized as federal policy in the recently enacted Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994, the Clinton Administration's major education program, as well as in Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. According to Pitsch (1995), 47 states are now participating in Goals 2000. Though different approaches will be used by the states, acceptance of these eight national goals is one of the major preconditions for receipt of federal fiscal incentives. The eight goals should thus be considered

an integral part of the rural school improvement agenda in most situations: all children will come to school ready to learn (goal 1); high school graduation rates will increase to 90 percent (goal 2); all students must demonstrate competency in English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography (goal 3); teachers will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their knowledge and skills (goal 4); students should be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement (goal 5); illiteracy should be eradicated (goal 6); schools should be free of drugs, violence, unauthorized firearms and alcohol, and offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning (goal 7); and every school will promote increased parental involvement (goal 8) (*National Education Goals Panel*, 1996, p. 2).

Other important provisions of Goals 2000 are the requirements that the states outline: (1) how they will develop curricular-content standards for the disciplines identified in the national education goals, (2) how they will establish student performance standards that are aligned with the content standards, (3) how they will establish professional development standards aligned with the content standards, and (4) how they will approach the design of opportunity-to-learn standards.

These four provisions must also be considered part of the rural school improvement agenda. The two related movements to develop curricular-content standards and student performance standards that are aligned with these are, in part, an outgrowth of research on the effects of measurement driven instruction (MDI). Rose (1994) summarized the research literature driving the MDI movement in this way:

> Convinced by overwhelming research evidence that tests drive instruction. . .and fueled with new cognitive research input on the teaching of higher order "thinking skills". . . educators sought to use the MDI phenomenon to improve instruction by improving the measurement that drives the instruction. (p. 3)

The need for a close connection between instruction and assessment is referred to by Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran (1995) as "authentic pedagogy" (p. 1). This concept argues that "all instructional activities must be rooted in a primary concern for high standards of intellectual quality" (p. 1). These high standards must reflect a commitment to ensuring that students become active learners.

The proponents of some form of opportunity-to-learn standards movement (e.g., Porter, 1996; Stevens, 1993) argue that if students are to be required to master curriculum areas stressed in the content standards, and if high stakes assessments aligned with these standards

are to be used, then it is only fair and equitable that they be in a school setting that provides an opportunity to receive the curriculum, instruction, and instructional support services necessary to meet these challenges. Similarly, if teachers are to be held accountable for their students' success, then they too must be provided the opportunity to acquire the competencies and skills necessary to provide the learning and teaching environment necessary for their students to acquire higher-order thinking skills.

There is, of course, opposition to the curricular-content standards movement. Concerns about this development focus on the age-old philosophical issue of the relationship of the federal government and state government in setting education policy, and whether or not the promotion of content standards will lead to a national curriculum. In addition to philosophical concerns, a large number of measurement issues surround the development of high-stakes student performance assessment standards. The use of opportunity-to-learn standards is perhaps even more controversial and faces an even more uncertain future.

Nonetheless, the assumption is made here that there will not be any major abandonment of these four expressions of the push for higher standards and more rigorous accountability. Thus, all four movements will remain a part of the rural school improvement agenda being constructed here.

The Push for Site-Based Management

A second key feature of recent national and state policy initiatives that also helps shape the rural school improvement agenda is the intent to institutionalize site-based management practices. Site-based management is a new name for a very old concept in organizational theory. It argues that the decentralization of authority to the lowest possible organizational level and the engagement of all stakeholders in decision making will improve the quality of decisions and, subsequently, the quality of the work of the organization.

The evidence is sketchy at this time that site-based decision making practices will result in improvements in student performance. However, in a recent synthesis of work done by the School-Based Management project (SBM) for the Finance Center of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Wohlstetter and Mohrman (1994) offer these comments:

> The bottom line is that school-based management is not an end in itself, although research indicates that it can help foster an improved school culture and higher-quality decisions. School-based

> management is, however, a potentially valuable tool for engaging the talents and enthusiasm of far more of a school's stakeholders than traditional, top-down governance systems. Moreover, once in place, SBM holds the promise of enabling schools to better address students' needs. This promise is more likely, however, if a "high-involvement" model of SBM is followed. This model envisions teachers and principals being trained and empowered to make decisions related to management and performance; having access to information to inform such decisions; and being rewarded for their accomplishments. (p. 1)

The current support for site-based management, moreover, comes from what Stinnette (1993) refers to as a "climate of crisis" (p. 2), a feeling that fundamental changes are needed in the structure and governance of an educational system that is not working Whatever the motive of proponents of site-based management, support for the concept is widespread, especially in state policy communities, and it has become one of the cornerstones of the current systemic reform movement.

To be sure, there are those who raise concerns regarding the compatibility of the site-based movement and the accountability movement. Weiler's (1990) essay on the decentralization of the governance of educational systems captured the concerns of cautionary voices when he pointed out the inherent "tension between decentralization on one hand and the tendency of the modern state to assert or reassert centralized control over the educational system on the other" (p. 1). As Weiler correctly points out, this tension will be most pronounced in the relationship between decentralization (giving away power) and evaluation (taking back power) (p. 446). The willingness of both the state and then a school district that continues to be the legally responsible unit for what transpires in its individual schools to grant substantial authority to a building site promises to be an interesting journey. For the immediate future, however, the commitment to push this reform effort is so strong that it must be placed on the rural school improvement agenda.

Parental Involvement and Choice

The pressure to engage parents in a meaningful way in their children's education and to provide them with choice options would seem to be so intense that it warrants special mention as one of the building blocks of the rural school improvement agenda. The promotion of increased parental participation has been institutionalized in the national education goals (goal 8) and is now a priority in state plans to implement

Goals 2000. Parents are also included as one of the key stakeholders in most state legislative efforts to promote site-based management.

One of the reasons for the recent priority given parental involvement would seem to be the acceptance of the oft-quoted phrase "a parent is the child's first and most influential teacher." The research literature supportive of the central role of parents in shaping a child's attitude toward schooling also appears to be overwhelming. Especially noteworthy is the assertion by James Coleman (1991) that ". . .research shows conclusively that parents' involvement in their children's education confers great benefits, both intellectual and emotional, on their children" (p. 1). Some of the strongest theoretical work supporting parental involvement is being done by Joyce Epstein of the Center on Families, Schools and Children's Learning at John Hopkins University. Epstein (1992), who prefers to use the richer term "school and family partnerships," stated:

> One major message of the early and continuing studies is simply and clearly that families are important for children's learning, development, and school success. The research suggests that students at all grade levels do better academic work and have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors if they have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved. (p. 1141)

Not only has the promotion of greater parental involvement been virtually institutionalized in the systemic reform movement, but providing greater parental choice options is rapidly becoming popular as well. There appear to be several major forms of parental choice emerging at the present time: intradistrict choice options that allow attendance of schools within the same district, interdistrict choice options that facilitate attendance at schools outside a student's home district, and the increasingly popular charter school movement.

The outcome of the accelerated pace of the implementation of parental choice options can only be speculated on at this time. What does seem clear is that the political debate on this topic will continue as the initial supporters of greater parental options have been joined by some critics of public education who see this as one way to inject competition into basic education. What seems certain, however, is that ways to bring about the greater involvement of parents will remain on the agenda of rural school improvement efforts.

Promotion of Education Partnerships

Partnerships between school districts and other public and private agencies and organizations have been in existence for a very long

period. Beginning in the mid 1980s, however, promotion of the need for and value of schools collaborating with others was given renewed prominence in proposals advanced by many national commissions offering their prescriptions for reforming public education. The movement has also received the endorsement of many major national professional associations. Moreover, policies were explicitly included in federal legislation (e.g., Educational Partnership Act of 1988, Improving America's Schools Act of 1994) and have been endorsed by many state governors.

The broad advocacy of partnerships virtually assures its continued placement on the rural school improvement agenda. This seems certain, even though evidence of the value of partnerships is still largely anecdotal. Grobe (1993) cited the potential benefits to partners in this way:

> Business gains: improved public relations, better prepared entry-level employees, decreased training costs, increased productivity, heightened potential for local economic development;
>
> Education gains: increased public confidence and support for education, increased access to new technology, enhanced opportunities for professional growth and development, increased resources (dollars and people), increased staff morale and student success (resulting in fewer problems, e.g., violence, truancy, suspensions);
>
> Higher education gains: increased college admission and retention, better prepared students, decreased remediation costs;
>
> Parent and student gains: increased voice in education affairs, empowerment, increased and more effective services, enhanced higher education and career opportunities; and
>
> Community gains: improved quality of life, a strong education system that can attract newcomers to the city. (p. 7)

Grobe's listing of potential benefits will likely be accepted by many of the proponents of education partnerships of whatever type as having substantial face validity. Moreover, renewed support for two specific types of partnerships appears to be even stronger–those involving greater collaboration between elementary-secondary and postsecondary education and those entailing greater cooperation between education and other human services providers.

At the federal level, the recently enacted Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 includes several provisions that provide incentives

to engage postsecondary education in the school reform movement. The Education Commission of the States (1992) stressed the need to involve postsecondary education in the reform movement in its proposal for systemic reform. These developments illustrate the current interest of the federal and state policy communities in forging meaningful collaboration between elementary-secondary and postsecondary education. As a result, this form of educational partnership will be kept on the rural school improvement agenda.

The promotion of greater collaboration between education and other human services providers is perhaps even stronger and arguably more controversial. Recent support for the concept at the national level is to be found in several major legislative enactments. A large number of advocacy groups have also issued position papers supporting the concept. Much activity is also evident at the state level. One of the most ambitious state approaches at this time would seem to be what is occurring in Kentucky, where family resource and service centers are being established across the Commonwealth. The movement to forge this form of education partnerships is not without controversy, as suggested above. Some advocates appear to support the complete integration of education and child-serving health and social agencies. A recent report of the Committee for Economic Development (1994), *Putting Learning First*, is representative of the position of more cautionary voices:

> . . . groups other than schools must pay for and provide the health and social services that children need to succeed academically; and, these services may be placed in the schools, delivered through the schools, but not be made the responsibility of the schools. (p. 1)

It seems certain that the push for collaboration of some form between education and other human services providers will not diminish, especially for rural education, where the benefits of close ties with other community services appear to be numerous, as Bhaerman (1994) has argued.

Promotion of the Use of Technology

That rural districts must make greater use of technology in their school improvement efforts is one of the developments cited here that can be taken as a given. Pressure to do so is prominent in several major federal policy initiatives (e.g., Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994) and in a large number of state initiatives. The premise is that information is the dominant resource in the United States today and will be even more so

in the future. America, if it is to remain competitive in a global society, it is argued, must have a workforce with the competencies and skills to function in an information-age world economy. Caissey (1989) provided one useful enumeration of what these individual skill requirements are: (1) research skills (ability to research, access, and retrieve information); (2) thinking skills (ability to analyze, access, and evaluate information); (3) decision-making skills (ability to renew information and make appropriate academic, life-style, career, and value-related decisions); and (4) problem-solving skills (ability to engage in the step-by-step application of specific skills) (pp. 43-44).

Additionally, and importantly, support for the greater use of technology stems from an emerging consensus against conventional approaches to learning and instruction and support for newer, research-driven approaches. In the view of Means, Blando, Olson, and Middleton (1993), this newer consensus "centers on instruction around authentic, challenging tasks" (p. 3), and what Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, and Rasmussen (1994) call *engaged learning.*

Many issues will need to be addressed if the full potential of technology in rural school improvement efforts is to be realized. However, the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) (1991) provided a gloomy assessment of the quality of the rural communication infrastructure, as defined by the OTA's three categories: (1) information technologies (which allow individuals to store, process, and reorganize data); (2) access and transmission technologies (the means by which individuals can transmit or receive information); and (3) network technologies (the means by which transmitted information can be managed, routed, and interconnected) (pp. 66-87).

The OTA assessment in the early 1990s could soon change as the result of the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which provides access to advanced telecommunication services for all schools and libraries and rural health care providers. However, work remains to be done in the integration of rural telecommunications and information technology policy within a national rural development policy. On this issue, it does not seem likely that there would be much disagreement with a conclusion reached in a 1994 U.S. General Accounting Office report which contended that, "The many complex and narrowly focused programs . . . are an inefficient surrogate for a single federal policy for economic development in rural areas" (p. 4).

Access issues, or more specifically, affordable access to telecommunication and information-age technologies, should be viewed as a critical part of the rural school improvement agenda. Moreover, the full potential of the use of technology means addressing other critical

issues as well. One relates to the poor physical facilities of many rural districts. The few attempts that have been made to isolate the general conditions of rural district facilities have uniformly concluded that substantial improvements are required to make facilities more supportive of the educational program, and the health and safety of students (e.g., Honeyman & Stewart, 1985; Honeyman, Wood, Thompson & Stewart, 1988; Thompson & Stewart, 1989; Thompson, Stewart, & Camp, 1989). More recent assessments of the general condition of the facilities of districts irrespective of type of locale–urban, suburban, or rural–also raise similar concerns about the quality of existing facilities (e.g., Honeyman, 1995; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995a).

Of interest here, in another report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) (1995b), a survey was conducted of approximately 10,000 schools and the GAO concluded that "far from the high-tech world of interactive media and virtual reality, many of our schools are wired for no more than filmstrip projectors" (p. 20). In still another conclusion bearing directly on the technology limitations in the physical facilities of schools, the GAO stated:

> In short, most of America's schools do not yet have key technologies or the facilities required to support learning into the 21st century. They cannot provide key facilities requirements and environmental conditions for education reform and improvement. In particular, older, unrenovated schools need infrastructure renovation to support technology. These renovations include fundamental changes to building structure, wiring and electrical capacity, air-conditioning and ventilation, and security. (p. 20)

A third major issue that must be addressed if the potential of the use of technology in rural school improvement is to be realized relates to the acute role of professional development. There is a clear consensus that the traditional role of the teacher must change. Means, Blando, Olson, and Middleton (1993) seem to have captured the essence of what many suggest are needed changes in instructional approaches (e.g., from teacher directed to student exploration, from didactic teaching to interactive modes, from individual to collaborative work, from teacher as knowledge dispenser to facilitator, from assessment of fact knowledge and discrete skills to performance-based assessment).

The changes necessary in the instructional approaches used by teachers, the need to provide staff assistance in acquiring the competencies and skills to make use of the technologies available for a concentration on engaged learning, and the need to provide staff with competencies to participate more fully in the affairs of the school all beg for a substantial commitment to professional development. Fur-

ther, it is through professional development that most progress is likely to be made in addressing what Hodas (1993) views as one of the greatest obstacles to the realization of the full potential of technology in schools–the organizational culture of educational organizations. This requirement seems irrefutable and subsequently ought to perhaps be viewed as "first among equals" in the rural school improvement agenda.

Other Pressures Contributing to the Improvement Agenda

Rural school district governing boards, administrators, staff, and community members make program determinations based on many considerations other than the types of policy and judicial decisions stressed previously. That is, rural decision makers, in an effort to provide a quality educational program, adapt ideas judged worthy on their own merits, irrespective of prompting by the desire to stay in compliance with federal or state statutes or judicial rulings. Ideas that address a pressing need or show promise of enriching educational opportunities are likely to receive consideration, especially if based on sound theory and supported by advocates respected in the rural education community.

There certainly is no shortage of ideas being promoted by advocates as ways to address rural district problems and issues, or for offering their favorite solution for enhancing the educational experiences of rural children and youth. From this large pool of potential candidates, three warrant brief mention here:

- the redesign of the rural school as the community learning center,
- the redesign of the rural school curriculum to make greater use of the rural community as the focus of the curriculum, and
- the more active engagement of the rural school in rural community development.

All three appear to be gaining support in the professional community. All are supported by a pervasive logic. All show promise to enhance the ability of rural districts to meet many of the traditional and newer demands in serving their students. Moreover, and importantly, the three have the clear possibility of expanding the mission of rural districts. Though the three do not at this point carry the force of the other key features of the improvement agenda, the considerations cited above justify their inclusion as part of the rural school improvement agenda.

All three concepts are not new, having circulated in the professional community for some time. All three, for example, were stressed in the prestigious White House Conference on Rural Education held a half-century ago (The White House Conference on Rural Education, 1945). Many circumstances, however, account for the renewed interest in the concepts that would suggest that they will no longer occupy the back shelves in the professional and policy communities.

School as Community Learning Center

The rural school that serves as the community learning center is, in part, being promoted as a natural extension of the move to bring about the massive introduction of telecommunications and information-age technologies into the rural school. A rural school typically represents the richest asset in a rural community–in fiscal resources, in physical plant and equipment, and in human resources. It thus has many of the necessary building blocks to contribute to what will clearly be increasingly required of the rural community if it is to remain viable or become a "rural learning community" (Gooler, 1994, p. 13). Cetron (1988) predicted that the demands for life-long learning are so great that schools will have no choice but to move away from only offering "adult education as a community service" (p. 10). Cetron is probably correct concerning this no-choice requirement for schools, especially those located in rural communities:

> Many public schools will be open 24 hours a day, retraining adults from 4 p.m. to midnight and renting out their costly computer and communications systems to local business during the graveyard shift. (p. 10)

Use of Community to Enrich Curriculum

Arguments for redesigning the curriculum of rural schools to ensure that the community becomes a focus are, in part, based on the strong evidence that experiential education is most effective, and that doing so will help address the limited resources typically available (Nachtigal, Haas, Parker, & Brown, 1989). In his summary comments concluding the White House Conference on Rural Education, Jones (1945) stressed many of these same points:

> The rural community is particularly rich in educative materials and opportunities. Urban centers are paying millions of dollars to provide cheap and inadequate substitutes for many of the experiences the rural child enjoys for absolutely nothing. If parents and teachers of rural children could but appreciate this inexhaustible wealth of potential education there is no way of

> estimating the consequent improvement in the quality of rural life. (p. 219)

Hobbs (1991) argued that rural schools have the advantage of offering their students opportunities to "learn how to learn–a skill that is transferable anywhere" (p. 28). This advantage, argued Hobbs, can best be maximized by using the community to help students "learn more about their locality, their own culture, and economy" (p. 28). Orr (1992) is another who also argues that the community can be an important educational tool. One of his principal arguments is that "the study of place involves complementary dimensions of intellect: direct observation, investigation, experimentation, and skill in the application of knowledge" (p. 128). Others refer to these same dimensions as engaged learning.

School Involvement in Community Development

Agitation calling for the more active involvement of rural schools in rural community development comes from many sources. Certainly the continued economic stress being experienced in many regions of nonmetropolitan America is a major contributing cause. Perhaps equally important is the realization by community leaders that a strong education infrastructure is one of the necessary prerequisites for enhancing the quality of life and thus aiding community development efforts. A parallel realization by rural school interests is that the probability is slim that there can be a viable, healthy rural school in a rural community that is itself not viable or healthy. The two are indispensable to each other.

Ways that the rural school can contribute to rural community include the position that, since education makes major contributions to the capacity of individuals, it also is contributing to the community development process (Hobbs, 1991). Mulkey (1992) alluded to this same theme when discussing both the private and public returns from an investment in human capital:

> Community efforts (and dollars) devoted to school improvement represent such an investment. Students benefit directly through higher earnings, communities benefit indirectly to the extent that improved schools make the community a more attractive place to live, and when better educated individuals remain in the community, their increased productivity contributes to the development of the larger community. (pp. 15-16)

Mulkey (1992) recommends ways that rural schools can contribute to rural community development: strive to deliver a quality education

for all, expand their mission to include the broader educational needs of the community, teach both students and residents about their community and how it works, focus on preparing residents to accept and use modern technology, focus on the development of leadership skills and entrepreneurial abilities, and provide leadership in programs designed to increase awareness of community educational needs and the importance of education to individual and community development (pp. 16-17). These suggestions represent high expectations for the role of the rural school in rural community development.

Summary

An imposing rural school district improvement agenda has been outlined here. The agenda, summarized in table 4, will tax the commitment, energy, and resources of all school districts, large and small, wealthy and poor. It most assuredly will weigh heavily on the nation's rural school districts that are already burdened with many handicaps in their institutional capacity to respond. The nature of these handicaps, as well as assets, that rural systems can bring to their school improvement efforts are considered in the next chapter.

Table 4
The Rural School District Improvement Agenda

Expansion of Concept of Equal Educational Opportunity

- eliminate race as a determinant of access
- guarantee due process rights
- eliminate local wealth as determinant of access
- eliminate handicapping condition as a determinant of access
- eliminate gender as a determinant of access
- eliminate geography as a determinant of access

Emerging National and State Policy Initiatives

- achieve high standards in curricular content areas
- achieve high student performance standards, aligned to content
- achieve high professional development standards, also aligned
- achieve opportunity-to-learn standards
- promote site-based management
- promote use of telecommunication technologies in teaching and learning
- promote early childhood education
- promote parental involvement and parental choice
- promote educational partnerships with post-secondary, other human-services providers, private sector
- promote connection of school experience to student's future work or career

Other Pressures

- redesign school as community learning center
- promote use of community as focus of curriculum
- promote engagement of school in community development

Chapter 3

A Profile of the Institutional Capacity of Rural School Districts and Rural Communities

The need to examine the existing institutional capacity of a school district to address school improvement efforts is indisputable. Yet, there has been little direct discussion of this matter in much of the debate surrounding what ails public education and how best to fix it. Timar and Kirp's (1987) piece on the need to focus on what they refer to as "institutional competency" is certainly an exception. In a subsequent statement, Timar (1989) argues that:

> A theory of institutional support suggests that state policy makers must agree that schools as institutions–not teachers or students or curricula–are the principal targets of reform. Tightening curriculum standards or ratcheting up teacher certification requirements, for example, may mean nothing if schools lack the competence to make use of curriculum and better-qualified teachers. Quality education comes from sound public institutions, not disparate programs. (p. 23)

Schneider (1993) raised similar concerns when he asserted that ". . . systemic reform is probably dead on arrival at most schoolhouse doors" (p. 36). He was specifically concerned about the physical capacity of schools to house the new, more comprehensive expectations called for in the systemic-reform movement (e.g., space for on-site staff development, the prerequisites for the use of telecommunications options). In an earlier commentary (Stephens, 1987), I raised specific concerns about the institutional capacity of rural school districts to

respond to what now seems the quite timid reform proposals advanced in the mid 1980s:

> None of the recent approaches have adequately addressed a basic prerequisite for sustained, long-term improvement: the need to strengthen the infrastructure of most state systems of elementary and secondary education. Though all segments of the structure deserve renewed attention, it is the rural small-school component that will prove the Achilles' heel of the school-excellence movement unless this sector receives immediate attention. (p. 25)

Discussed below is the approach used to develop the profile of the institutional capacity of rural districts, followed by the profile of common strengths and weaknesses that typically confront rural systems engaged in school improvement efforts. While it is possible and useful to establish general tendencies, it is important to be ever mindful that great diversity is also present in systems of this type. A discussion of the nature of this diversity concludes the chapter.

Three major decisions were made in designing a profile to focus on the institutional capacity of rural communities:

- to organize the profile around a conceptualization of the institutional capacity of rural districts that is relatively straightforward, yet meaningful;
- to use only critical indicators of their health and performance; and
- to accept the benefits of causal modeling in indicator development.

A brief discussion of each of these three design features is provided below.

Conceptualizing Institutional Capacity

Institutional capacity is defined in many ways in education and in other disciplines, primarily because there are numerous useful ways to view the workings of complex organizations. As used here, the construct is defined to mean consideration of three major categories of features of rural school districts: their structural/organizational features, the processes they use in decision making, and their cultural features. Using this multidimensional conceptualization promotes a view of rural school districts as systems composed of interrelated parts. One useful way to think about universal properties or subsystems of an educational organization (rural, suburban, or urban) is provided in figure 2.

Studying the dominant structural/organizational, process, and cultural features common to rural school districts facilitates an under-

Dimension #1—Structural/Organizational Features
The properties of an educational organization—its governance, management, student, staffing, instructional, instructional support, financial, facilities, and equipment subsystems
plus
Dimension #2—Process Features
The ways in which the organization makes planning, organizing, directing, and evaluation decisions concerning its organizational/structural and cultural features
plus
Dimension #3—Cultural Features
The basic assumptions and beliefs shared by members of the district and community concerning the mission of the district, its internal relationships, and its relationship to its environment

Figure 2. Universal Dimensions of Institutional Capacity

standing of their health and performance–that is, their institutional capacity to engage in school improvement.

Definition of an Indicator

Many measures currently in use provide a global description of the conditions generally found in public elementary-secondary districts or in one of the major components of the public school universe, as the profile provided below will attempt to do. Not all of these measures, however, have equal value in providing the most meaningful depiction of the health and performance of an educational institution. In profiling the institutional capacity of rural districts, only indicators that satisfy the working definition advanced in an earlier report of a U.S. Department of Education task force will be used.

> Indicators, or statistics that reveal something about the health or performance of the educational system, constitute the basic building blocks of state performance accountability systems. However, not all statistics about education can function appropriately as indicators. Statistics qualify as indicators only if they serve as gauges, that is, if they tell a great deal about the entire system by reporting the conditions of a few particularly significant features. (OERI, 1988, p. 5)

One of the examples used by the task force is instructive:

> The number of students enrolled in schools is an important fact about the size of the educational system, but it tells little about how well the system is functioning. On the other hand, a statistic that reports the proportion of secondary students who have successfully completed advanced study in mathematics provides useful information about the level at which students are participating and achieving in that subject. This statistic provides considerable insight about the condition of the system and can be appropriately considered an indicator. (OERI, 1988, p. 5)

There will be substantial differences among observers about which indicators "serve as gauges" for which conditions. These differences are due to the world view and value system held by different individuals. There are, however, other critical explanations for disagreement concerning what constitutes appropriate gauges. As Grandy (1989) noted, "Education indicators are nearly always indicators of constructs, and those constructs are rarely well defined. The result is that the linkage between an indicator and what it allegedly indicates is often tenuous" (p. 12).

Concerns about potential disagreement with regard to world view and poorly defined constructs notwithstanding, four criteria are used here to select indicators of the institutional capacity of rural districts:

- an indicator must reflect a characteristic of the communities served by rural districts and of the districts themselves that are known or highly likely to be associated with their health and performance (*context indicators*);
- an indicator must reflect the financial, staffing, student, and other human and physical resources available to districts that are known or highly likely to be associated with their health and performance (*input indicators*);
- an indicator must reflect the programming, instructional, and organizational resources available to the districts that are known or highly likely to be associated with their health and performance (*process indicators*); and
- an indicator must reflect a measure of the quality of schooling provided by the districts (*outcome indicators*).

Causal Modeling Approach Used

Using the four selection criteria above represents an application of the causal modeling approach to indicator development. The major assumptions made in the causal modeling approach have been expressed by Shavelson, McDonnell, and Oaks (1989):

> . . .the model and its major domains should be empirically, rather than normatively, derived; a major criterion for selecting the potential indicators within each domain should be their ability to measure core features of schooling; and where possible, indicators should be derived from research that identifies the factors associated with important schooling outcomes. (p. 13)

Moreover, it is useful to again note a point raised earlier in the discussion of the conceptionalization of the institutional capacity of rural districts. The choices made by advocates supporting the use of certain indicators as opposed to others ordinarily reflect their acceptance of one or a combination of several possible conceptions of the structural, organizational, process, and cultural features of organizations. Equally important, the choices made also reflect a position of whether or not one should view these features as being related to or interactive with each other.

A Profile of the Institutional Capacity of Rural Districts

The profile of the institutional capacity that follows makes use of content, input, process, and outcome indicators that gauge established tendencies and patterns characterizing the institutional capacity of rural school districts. These indicators have been organized around the structural/organizational, process, and cultural features of a district and community that commonly characterize systems of this type. The profile begins with one of the most dominant features of rural districts–their small enrollment size. Discussion of other common patterns and tendencies is provided, followed by a brief consideration of two special classes of rural systems warranting extraordinary attention–those located in nonadjacent nonmetropolitan areas and those in persistent poverty nonmetropolitan areas.

The First Dominant Feature: Their Small Enrollments

One of the most prominent features of rural districts is their small enrollment, in both a relative sense (when compared to all urban and many suburban districts) and in absolute terms. A rural district is by definition a small-scale organization.

Elder's (1994) breakthrough work is again used to establish the tendency of most rural districts to have small enrollments. As established previously, Elder's data set was from the 1989-90 school year. Any changes in the ensuing years have likely been a further decline in the enrollment of many rural districts, especially in nonmetropolitan

regions that have experienced continued economic stress, followed by population loss.

As shown in table 5, the substantial majority of the 7,145 rural districts in the nation (96 percent) included in Elder's calculations have enrollments of less than 2,500. Over 40 percent had enrollments of less than 300. Just under 4 percent had enrollments in excess of 2,500.

The percentage of rural districts with enrollments under 300 varies substantially by region. They are common in New England, the Midwest and the West (see table 5). In many states the proportion of such districts exceeds the national average. In other states, there are no such districts. For example, in the South and Middle Atlantic regions, seven states have no rural districts with enrollments less than 300. In the South, many school districts are county districts.

Table 5
Rural District Enrollment Patterns, 1989-90

			Enrollment*		
Division	% Rural Districts	N	Under 300	300 to 2,500	Over 2,500
New England	35.99	420	71.19	28.57	0.24
CT	13.86	23	56.52	43.48	0.00
ME	54.59	125	61.60	37.60	0.80
MA	12.69	42	61.90	38.10	0.00
NH	42.68	67	65.67	34.33	0.00
RI	7.89	3	33.33	66.67	0.00
VT	65.04	160	86.25	13.75	0.00
Middle Atlantic	20.55	378	17.20	70.90	11.90
DE	37.50	6	0.00	16.67	83.33
DC	0.00	0	–	–	–
MD	16.67	4	0.00	0.00	100.00
NJ	11.89	66	45.45	51.52	3.03
NY	27.46	204	16.67	76.47	6.86
PA	19.60	98	1.02	78.57	20.41
Midwest	43.67	1,438	20.03	76.98	2.99
IL	38.64	369	34.15	65.58	0.27
IN	33.77	102	2.94	94.12	2.94
MI	35.83	201	17.91	77.11	4.98
MN	70.74	307	31.60	67.43	0.98
OH	36.93	226	1.77	89.38	8.85
WI	54.31	233	9.44	87.98	2.58

Note: Rural districts are those where 75 percent of the students attend a regular public school in a rural locale.

* Except for N, figures are percentages.

	% Rural	N	<300	300-2,500	>2,500
West North Central	74.87	1,913	56.19	42.71	1.10
IA	69.61	300	26.00	73.67	0.33
KS	81.58	248	26.61	68.15	5.24
MO	66.79	362	38.95	59.39	1.66
NE	72.31	585	83.93	15.90	0.17
ND	91.55	260	78.85	21.15	0.00
SD	85.41	158	59.49	40.51	0.00
South Atlantic	30.18	201	1.00	66.67	32.34
FL	13.43	9	0.00	66.67	33.33
GA	29.03	54	3.70	70.37	25.93
NC	27.61	37	0.00	45.95	54.05
SC	28.57	26	0.00	80.77	19.23
VA	39.85	53	0.00	67.92	32.08
WV	40.00	22	0.00	72.73	27.27
East South Central	30.62	184	3.80	63.04	33.15
AL	18.60	24	4.17	33.33	62.50
KY	35.03	62	4.84	66.13	29.03
MS	44.23	69	2.90	65.22	31.88
TN	20.86	29	3.45	65.86	20.69
West South Central	57.22	1,177	40.70	57.26	2.04
AR	63.83	210	26.19	72.86	0.95
LA	11.94	8	0.00	75.00	25.00
OK	64.07	387	55.56	43.67	0.78
TX	54.12	572	36.54	60.49	2.97
Mountain	66.16	821	70.04	29.11	0.85
AZ	40.18	88	59.09	39.77	1.14
CO	63.07	111	48.65	50.45	0.90
ID	64.35	74	39.19	60.81	0.00
MT	84.92	456	90.57	9.43	0.00
NV	41.18	7	28.57	42.86	28.57
NM	54.55	48	39.58	58.33	2.08
UT	35.00	14	14.29	71.43	14.29
WY	46.94	23	17.39	82.61	0.00
Pacific	35.76	613	51.06	46.00	2.94
AK	81.82	45	40.00	55.56	4.44
CA	26.63	282	49.65	46.45	3.90
HI	0.00	0	–	–	–
OR	38.28	116	73.28	26.72	0.00
WA	57.43	170	41.18	55.88	2.94
United States	47.21	7,145	43.43	52.58	3.99

Source: Reprinted with permission. Elder, W.L. (1992). The use of census geography and county typologies in the construction of classification systems for rural schools and districts. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 8(5) 60.

Rural district enrollment levels vary in states with a statewide network of educational service agencies. Of special note is the large percent of rural systems with enrollments of less than 300 in several states: about 73 percent of Oregon's 116 rural districts, about 41 percent of Washington's 170 rural districts, and about 56 percent of Connecticut's 23 rural districts have very small enrollments. Even among some countywide districts, enrollments can be low; for example, nearly three quarters of West Virginia's 22 rural county districts have enrollments of less than 2,500 students.

Other Discernable Patterns and Tendencies

What else can be said about the institutional capacity of rural school districts to mount and sustain their school improvement efforts? That is, do the more than 7,000 rural systems in the nation tend to exhibit general tendencies, patterns, and predispositions in their operations that will assist educational service agencies as they seek to enhance their potentially critical supportive role? The answer is both "yes" and "no": "yes" because there are important distinguishing features of most rural systems well documented in the literature; "no" because of the great diversity that exists among districts of this type and the communities they serve.

What follows is a profile of other common strengths and weaknesses in the structural/organizational, process, and cultural features that are important to think about when considering how best to assist rural districts. Judgments were made as to the most meaningful context, input, process, and outcome indicators to use in the construction of the profile; another, potentially debatable, decision was made to use comparative judgments as well. In this exercise, then, the institutional capacity of rural systems was compared to urban and suburban districts. The decision to use comparative judgment instead of other possible standards (e.g., normative judgment, goal-centered judgment, improvement judgment, trait judgment), is based on two major practical, not philosophical, considerations. The first is that many of the most current national data on characteristics of rural systems used in the profile were drawn from national data collection systems which increasingly attempt to make distinctions between rural, urban, and suburban. Secondly, comparisons between rural and other types of systems have regrettably always been one of the principal ways that the status of rural education is debated in the policy, research, and school improvement communities, though not always with negative consequences for rural interests. It is unlikely that there will be any major, widespread shifts in this dominant practice.

The assessment of common strengths and weaknesses in the institutional capacity of rural districts is provided in table 6. Six indicators of common strengths are cited, as are 12 indicators of common weaknesses. All 18 indicators are judged to be critical measures that offer significant insights on the institutional capacity of rural systems to potentially mount a school improvement process.

Table 6

Common Strengths and Weaknesses in the Institutional Capacity of Rural Districts Compared With Suburban and Urban Districts

Dimension	Indicators of Common Strengths	Indicators of Common Weaknesses
Organizational/Structural Features		
governance subsystem		
management subsystem	less thickening of bureaucracy	fewer management support services
student subsystem	lower pupil-teacher ratios; lower dropout rates	greater per pupil cost
staffing subsystem		higher number of teachers teaching outside major specialty at secondary level; less competitive salaries and benefits
instructional subsystem		less breadth and depth in secondary program (especially in science, math, and language); less availability of programs for disabled students; less availability of telecommunication technologies
instructional support subsystem		
financial subsystem	greater fiscal effort	less fiscal capacity; higher per pupil costs
facilities and equipment subsystem		less specialized space and equipment for science, math, and languages
Process features		less availability of planning support services; fewer evaluation support services; greater parent involvement; greater community support for school district
Cultural features		

The two lists exclude other meaningful indicators likely to enjoy wide support as a gauge of the institutional capacity of an educational organization. Omitted, for example, is reference to a number of influential structural/organizational features (e.g., characteristics of the student enrollment, the availability of preschool programs) or reference to other important cultural norms (e.g., collegiality of staff). Limiting these two lists is related to the decision to use comparative data in constructing the profile intended to portray conditions likely to prevail in rural systems. An expanded profile would, without question, be more appropriate if the focus of this exercise were on an individual state or an individual rural school district.

On The Institutional Capacity of Rural Communities

The second profile presented here focuses on the general condition of rural communities, which provide much of the support for their school systems. The general condition of rural communities has important meaning for the institutional capacity of school districts as they attempt to mount and sustain a school improvement process. In turn, such local efforts ought to frame the roles that educational service agencies play in providing assistance.

Two considerations are emphasized in the profile. The first stresses the *prevailing economic condition* likely to be found in the vast nonmetropolitan regions of the nation. The second is a general overview of *common difficulties* facing rural local governments in providing public services.

The Prevailing Economic Condition

Rural communities, although scattered all across the landscape of this nation, are mostly located in nonmetropolitan counties that, as shown in figure 3, dominate the land area of the country. As a group, nonmetropolitan counties in 1990 have experienced lower per capita income than metropolitan counties, a higher poverty rate than metropolitan counties, and lower levels of population increases than metropolitan counties (Hobbs, 1994, p. 153).

These three measures say something important about the general vitality of rural communities situated in nonmetropolitan counties. They reflect the restructuring of the national economy and the transformations occurring in the world economy over much of the past two decades. These national and international trends, however, affect nonmetropolitan regions in varying ways. The first of two typologies developed by the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. De-

Rural Economy Division, Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the Bureau of the Census.

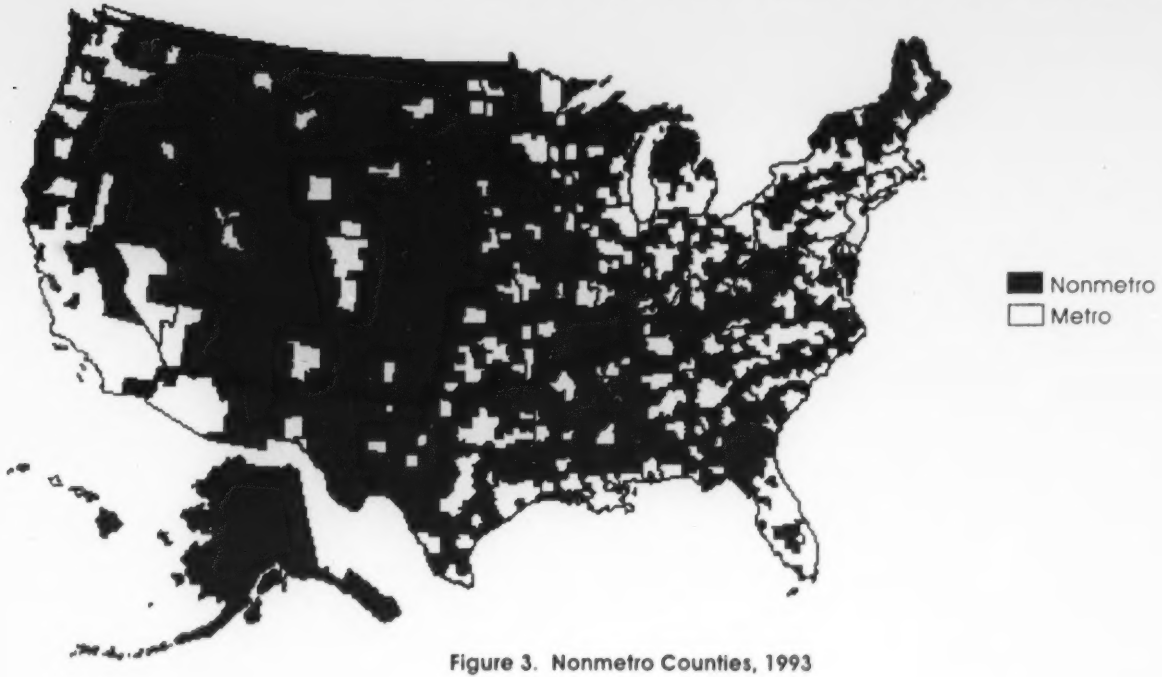

Figure 3. Nonmetro Counties, 1993

partment of Agriculture (Cook & Mizer, 1994) classified all of the nearly 2,300 nonmetro counties according to six mutually exclusive primary economic types and according to five policy types. The economic types included *farming-dependent* (556), geographically concentrated in the Midwest; *mining-dependent* (146), mostly in the South and West; *manufacturing-dependent* (506), three-fifths located in the West; *government-dependent* (244), scattered across the nation; *services-dependent* (323), fairly evenly distributed although slightly higher in the West; and *nonspecialized* (484), largest majority in the South, but also scattered. The policy classification assigned over three quarters of the nonmetro counties to five types according to themes were judged to be of special policy significance: *retirement-destination* (190), over 80 percent located in the South or West; *federal lands* (270), over 67 percent in Western states; *commuting* (381), approximately two-thirds in the South and 28 percent in the Midwest; *persistent poverty* (535), over 85 percent in the South; and *transfers-dependent* (381), large majority in the South.

Butler and Beale (1994) authored the latest update of ERS classifications of nonmetropolitan counties based on their total population and adjacency to a metropolitan county, the second of the two typologies. This rural-urban continuum code classifies all 3,101 counties in the nation into one of ten categories. The 813 metro counties in the nation in 1993 are classified on the basis of their total population. The 2,288 nonmetropolitan counties are classified according to their total population and adjacency to a metropolitan county. The regional distribution of the ten categories of metro and nonmetro counties in 1993 is shown in table 7.

The most severe consequences of the restructuring of the national economy and the transformation in the world economy appear to have been felt by rural communities located in farming-dependent, manufacturing-dependent, mining-dependent (all nonadjacent, nonmetropolitan) counties, and persistent-poverty nonmetropolitan counties (figure 4, p. 46). Population changes are, in general, most severe in rural communities located in farming-dependent counties in the Midwest, and manufacturing-dependent and mining-dependent counties in most regions, as shown in figure 5 (p. 47). As reported earlier, a strong majority of the persistent poverty counties are located in the South.

On the other hand, the economic vitality of rural communities situated in the 244 government-dependent and 190 retirement-destination counties appears to be relatively stable–even relatively prosperous, in the case of the latter.

Table 7
Regional Distribution of Metro and Nonmetro Counties, 1993

	Number				
Code*	U.S.	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Metro	813	122	221	379	91
0	167	41	41	53	32
1	132	16	47	61	8
2	315	46	69	174	26
3	199	19	64	91	25
Nonmetro	2,288	95	834	1,008	351
4	133	19	42	51	21
5	113	6	34	37	36
6	608	38	199	326	45
7	654	20	236	272	126
8	248	7	68	143	30
9	532	5	255	179	93
Total	3,101	217	1,055	1,387	442

* Rural-Urban Continuum Code:

Metro counties:
- 0 central counties of metro areas of 1 million population or more
- 1 fringe counties of metro areas of 1 million population or more
- 2 counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
- 3 counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population

Nonmetro counties:
- 4 urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
- 5 urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area
- 6 urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
- 7 urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
- 8 complete rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
- 9 complete rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area

Source: Butler, M.A., & Beale, C.L. (1994). *Rural-urban continuum codes for metro and nonmetro counties.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Agriculture and Rural Economy Division.

Rural Economy Division, Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the Bureau of the Census.

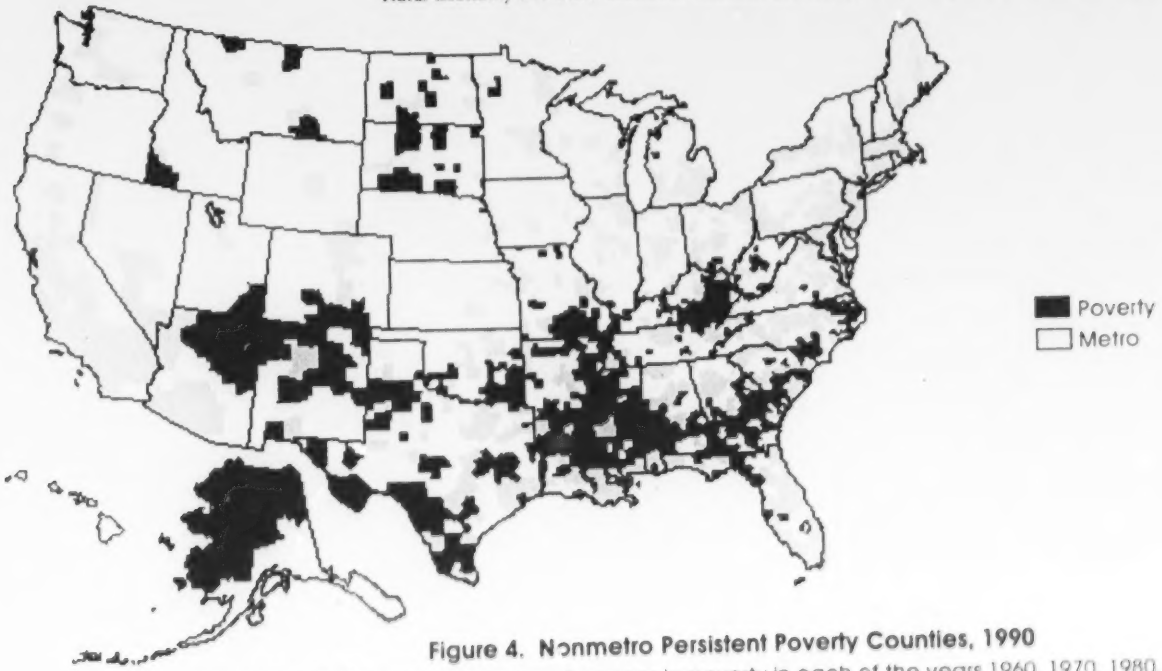

Figure 4. Nonmetro Persistent Poverty Counties, 1990
(counties with 20 percent or more of persons in poverty in each of the years 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990)

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Rural Economy Division, Economic Research Service, USDA, using data from the Bureau of the Census.

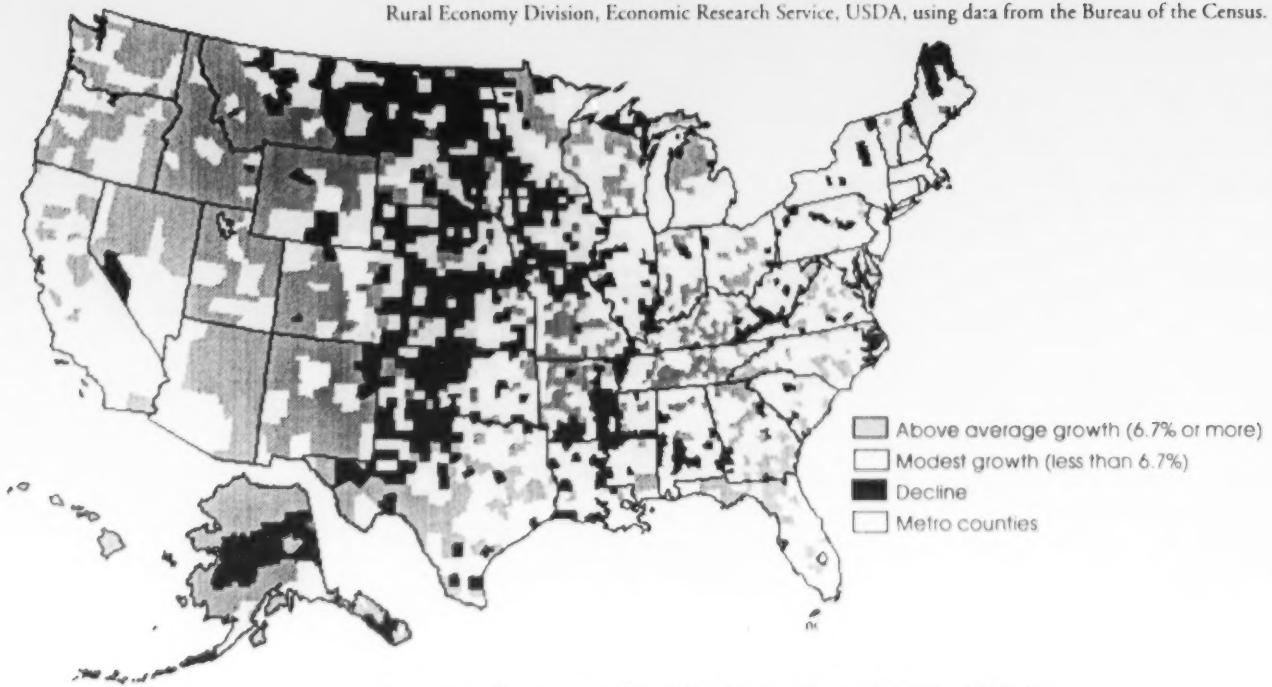

Figure 5. Nonmetro Counties Population Change, 1980-92

The only known effort to provide information on characteristics of rural school districts located in earlier versions of the two ERS typologies of nonmetropolitan areas was completed by Elder (1992). His analysis of the distribution of rural districts and their enrollment in each of six categories of nonmetro counties based on primary economic activity is shown in table 8. His calculation of several features of rural districts in each of the ten categories of nonmetropolitan counties in the rural-urban continuum code is shown in table 9.

Table 8
Selected Population and Education Statistics by ERS Nonmetropolitan County Economic Impact Types

Indicators	County Type					
	Farming Dependent	Manufacturing Dependent	Mining Dependent	Government Dependent	Unclassified	Persistent Poverty
Rural Districts, Schools, and Students						
Number of Rural Districts	1,589	874	141	722	1,569	280
Percentage of Districts Rural	83.11	48.39	51.27	61.03	62.16	67.15
Number of Rural Schools	3,334	3,542	809	2,307	4,157	1,213
Percentage of Schools Rural	78.41	44.90	55.87	50.90	53.14	69.75
Number of Rural Students	508,004	1,206,672	218,824	604,042	945,896	425,646
Percentage of Students Rural	61.44	36.00	44.27	36.09	37.90	60.25
Rural Districts with under 300 Students						
Number of Rural Districts	1,013	204	51	569	738	69
Percentage of Rural Districts	63.75	23.34	36.17	47.80	47.04	24.64

Note: Excludes Alaska, Hawaii, and outlying areas.
Source: Reprinted with permission. Elder, W.L. (1992). The use of census geography and county typologies in the construction of classification systems for rural schools and districts, *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 8 (3), 67.

Table 9
Districts, Schools, and Students: Density and Ratios by ERS County Types (1989-90)

County Type		Total N of Districts	N of Rural Districts
Metro		6,086 (40.37)*	1,317 (18.55)
0	Metro, Central Counties, 1 Million+	1,003 (6.65)	58 (0.82)
1	Metro, Fringe Counties, 1 Million+	1,830 (12.14)	321 (4.52)
2	Metro, 250K to 1 Million	2,045 (13.56)	472 (6.65)
3	Metro, Less Than 250K	1,208 (8.01)	466 (6.56)
Nonmetro		8,991 (59.63)	5,784 (81.45)
4	Nonmetro, Urban, 20K+, and Adjacent	988 (6.55)	415 (5.85)
5	Nonmetro, Urban, 20K+, and Not Adjacent	900 (5.97)	482 (6.79)
6	Nonmetro, Urban, 2.5K to 20K, and Adjacent	2,110 (13.99)	1,139 (16.04)
7	Nonmetro, Urban, 2.5K to 20K, and Not Adjacent	2,949 (19.56)	1,760 (24.79)
8	Nonmetro, Complete Rural, and Adjacent	576 (3.82)	555 (7.82)
9	Nonmetro, Complete Rural, and Not Adjacent	1,468 (9.74)	1,432 (20.17)
Total		15,077 (100.00)	7,100 (100.00)

* Figures in parentheses represent percentages of total.

Note: Excludes Alaska, Hawaii, and outlying areas.

Source: Reprinted with permission. Elder, W.L. (1992). The use of census geography and county typologies in the construction of classification systems for rural schools and district. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 8 (3), 64.

The Capacity of Rural Local Governments

Additional insight on the capacity of rural local governments to provide public services is offered by Ayres et al. (1990). Their synthesis of the nature of the barriers confronting rural local governments in the provision and production of public services stresses eight points:

- geographic isolation–affects service delivery; low utilization rates; inadequate response time for ambulance, fire, and police services; and professional isolation;
- population density–per unit cost of providing many services generally higher; harder to justify providing many services;
- mobility–public transportation services generally limited;
- security of fiscal resources–lack of fiscal capacity caused by several factors (e.g., rural poverty, an urban bias in many intergovernmental grant programs, local unawareness of programs designed to aid rural areas, insufficient staff to seek out grants);
- lack of expertise and human resources–serious shortages of expertise in many public service areas related in part to inadequate fiscal resources, lack of training opportunities to develop personnel, and small scale features that make it uneconomical and unnecessary for each small community to employ a full-time chief executive, which has consequences including understaffing of many functions, low quality and quantity of public services, and inattention to long-range planning;
- personal familiarity–has both advantages (e.g., personal attention to individual needs) and disadvantages (e.g., reluctance by residents to seek certain services such as mental health, drug addiction, or treatment for alcoholism);
- resistance to innovation–tendency for rural residents and public agencies to resist innovations and a pervasive conservative attitude toward providing nontraditional services; and
- lack of ancillary services–lack of support services to complement other public services so that the public service sector must work closely with private sources of assistance such as family, friends, religious organizations, and volunteers, to provide complete services (pp. 40-41).

Summary

Two profiles were introduced in this chapter, both intended to indicate the prospects confronting rural districts as they address the demanding school improvement agenda outlined in the preceding

chapter. The first identified common strengths and weaknesses in the institutional capacity of rural districts to mount and sustain a school improvement process. Both the conceptualization and design of the institutional capacity construct are admittedly arguable; they are, however, not without logic. The assessment that was offered would suggest that many rural systems face a formidable task in striving to implement their school improvement agenda.

The second profile provided an overview of commonly accepted barriers confronting rural local governments in the provision of public services. Many of the features in the capacity of rural local governments are similar to those that characterize rural districts. They, nonetheless, complicate the task of a rural system.

Together, the two profiles have important implications for the work of educational service agencies. They help establish much of the substantive content areas in which an ESA will likely need to concentrate its energies in serving as a first-line support system for their rural district constituency.

Chapter 4

Ways That Educational Service Agencies Currently Assist Rural Districts

As noted in chapter 1, one of the primary reasons for supporting the concept of a statewide network of educational service agencies where they now operate was the perceived potential benefits such a system would have for addressing rural education issues. Much of the initial support in the education community was based on the face validity of the argument that many rural districts do not have the capacity, when acting alone, to offer needed programs and services to their students, especially disabled students. Moreover, support in state policy communities stemmed from the argument that creating a delivery system to provide needed services to rural districts was an attractive policy option to another popular, but highly controversial, alternative–mandated school district reorganization. While providing assistance to rural districts in their service region is a common mission of most of the more than 500 ESAs in the 21 states focused on here, how this policy goal currently is and has been implemented continues to be marked by both commonalities and differences.

The intent of this section of the paper is to achieve two tasks. First, it provides an overview of current programming patterns common to many ESAs. This is followed by several observations concerning how these characteristic programming features affect the institutional capacity of a rural district that is fortunate enough to receive the services. Both of these tasks are necessary prerequisites for the consideration of what roles ESAs should play in the future to assist rural districts in their improvement efforts. Current programming activities are briefly re-

viewed. Many ESAs across the country are very effective in addressing a number of critical rural district needs, and these services ought to be retained. They should serve as important, though in some cases, refocused, features of the proposed new redesigned ESA role considered in the next chapter.

Programming Patterns

The profile that follows depicts tendencies and patterns in ESA programming practices. Currently, no national data system has the capacity to produce detailed descriptive data on the features of ESAs. The Executive Council of the American Association of Educational Service Agencies (AAESA) is in the process of designing such a system and has completed one phase of an intended three-phase project to extend over several years. The focus of the initial AAESA effort, completed in early 1995, was on selected features of state networks of ESAs, not on the organizational and operational features of individual units in a state network.[6]

The absence of a comprehensive database on individual service agencies is, of course, a major limitation on any attempt to profile and subsequently analyze the programming patterns of ESAs. However, I have over the past 30 years attempted to follow developments of organizations of this type. Past experiences with ESAs include these opportunities to remain reasonably knowledgeable concerning the roles they play: involvement in four national studies (Stephens, Spiess, Archambault, & Findley, 1967; Stephens, 1979; American Association of Educational Service Agencies, 1987; Office of School Health, 1994) and serving as a consultant to a majority of state education agencies where a statewide network of ESAs is in place or was being planned. Additionally, and what has proven to be quite useful, I have had opportunities to provide technical assistance to students working on doctoral dissertations at various universities across the country. These latter efforts typically focus on state-level service agency issues in the home state of the student or institute. It is not suggested that these and other types of related opportunities to make observations on an extended basis are an acceptable substitute for data that is national in scope, comprehensive, and current. Together, though, these prior experiences have nonetheless provided some credentials to inform the profile of common programming patterns that follows.

Classifying Common Programming Patterns

The profile classifies ESA services to public school districts into one

of three categories: direct instructional services to students and adults, instructional support services to public school districts, and management support services to public school districts. These three categories are part of a typology first field tested in an earlier large scale comprehensive national report on educational service agencies (Stephens, 1979).[7] The typology has been subsequently used in my own work and in numerous other state-level studies and national efforts in the ensuing years, and so appears to have continuing utility.

Estimating the Number of ESAs Offering Services

The following 4-point scale will be used to establish the estimated number of ESAs currently offering programs in the three major categories: strong majority–three-fourths or more offer the service (at least 16 of the 21 state networks); majority–one-half to three-fourths offer the service; limited–one-fourth to one-half offer the service; and very limited–less than one-fourth offer the service.

The purpose of estimating the number of ESAs involved in offering a service is consistent with the objective of presenting a profile of the potential contributions ESAs are currently making to enhance the institutional capacity of rural districts. The operative words here, of course, are "potential contributions." Critical questions concerning whether or not an individual ESA does in fact do so, and questions concerning the adequacy, equity, and quality of services that are offered are beyond consideration here. An overview of the most common areas of programs and services offered by ESAs, and estimates of the number of service agencies engaged in some aspect of each area, is provided in table 10 (p. 56).

Programs Offered and Number of ESAs Engaged

The estimate that a strong majority of ESAs are engaged in the provision of direct instruction for disabled students ought not come as a surprise. Service agencies (and their frequent predecessors in many states, county offices of education established in earlier times where local district boundaries were not coterminous with county geographic boundaries) have always been deeply immersed in providing direct instruction and other services to disabled students. In many instances, they are active in this program area under state mandate or with federal or state incentives to do so.[8] ESA involvement with disabled students has traditionally been most prevalent with the mentally retarded, hard of hearing and deaf, and learning disabled.

Other programming areas where the involvement of ESAs is estimated to be extensive include a number of critical instructional support services, such as curriculum development; staff development (for

Table 10

An Overview of Programs and Services Offered by ESAs, and Estimated Number of ESAs Involved

Program and Service Area	Estimated Number of ESAs Involved*
Direct instruction to students and adults	
1. Disabled students	strong majority
2. Vocational/technical education	very limited
3. Occupational education	limited
4. Outdoor/environment education	limited
5. Adult education	very limited
Instructional support services	
1. Curriculum development	strong majority
2. Staff development	strong majority
3. Instructional materials and technology	strong majority
4. Counseling and guidance	limited
5. Health services	limited
6. Social work	strong majority
Management support services	
1. Program evaluation	limited
2. Data processing	majority
3. Cooperative purchasing	majority
4. Financial and facility planning	very limited
5. Strategic planning	very limited
6. Legislative monitoring	majority

* Key:
strong majority - 3/4 or more offer
majority - 1/2 to 3/4 offer
limited - 1/4 to 1/2 offer
very limited - less than 1/4 offer

teachers, administrators, support staff); and the provision of instructional materials (e.g., film and print library, media services, technology assistance). The limited ESA involvement in health services appears to be concentrated on providing some of the more traditional activities, such as administration of medication and performance of child abuse

evaluations, and less on the two other major components of health services–health education and environmental health and safety (*Office of School Health,* 1994).

A majority of ESAs actively provide management support services to public school districts. These current practices also continue a long tradition (Stephens, Spiess, Archambault, & Findley, 1967, 1979). It would appear, though, that more ESAs are currently involved in certain types of management support services than in the past. It is estimated, for example, that far more ESAs now offer cooperative purchasing services. This shift is probably due to the increased pressures on local districts to engage in cost savings wherever possible. However, the growth of cooperative purchasing services in the educational service agency community has been aided by greater awareness of the continued successful operation of some of the first programs in the country that have begun to provide documentation of the fiscal benefits of such programs.[9]

The estimated number of ESAs currently offering legislative monitoring services to their constituent school districts also has increased. This shift is because there is now a state professional association of ESAs functioning in most states focused on here. Many of these relatively new organizations either employ an executive director or contract with another state organization to monitor state level activities (Stephens & Christiansen, 1995). These new capabilities and resources contribute substantially to an ESA's ability to pass on knowledge of state-level developments to local districts.[10]

The prominent role ESAs play in assisting rural districts in the current reform movement was established in a recent report by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) (Friedman & VanderPloeg, 1993). In one of the most comprehensive efforts of this type, NCREL surveyed within its seven-state service region a random sample of half of the rural school principals who served schools located in communities of fewer than 25,000 people. The survey sought the perceptions of principals regarding whether or not the service providers in the region were keeping pace with the reform demands faced by them. The availability of two categories of services were highlighted: basic (e.g., student services and a range of school management and operations services) and capacity-building (e.g., services that increase staff expertise and school resources that aid in curriculum development, student assessment, school improvement planning, and acquiring and using technology). The most frequently cited external service provider for basic services was an intermediate service agency, though other external providers were also reported (in

rank order from most to least frequent–state education agency, consultant(s), another district, professional associations, and college or university). Intermediate service agencies were also the most frequently cited external provider for capacity-building services received by the rural principals.

Though ESAs in the seven-state region can find some comfort in this report, they should not be too joyful. Another important finding of NCREL's ambitious project was that a substantial majority (89 percent) of principals indicated they were not getting all of the services needed to keep pace with reform initiatives undertaken in their respective states. This finding has implications not only for the rural district where the school is located, but for all of the external service providers that have a legal, ethical, or proprietary interest in assisting rural districts. The implications for the success of a state's reform efforts are also sobering.

The Impact of Current ESA Programming

Two sets of observations concerning the hypothesized impact of current programming patterns of ESAs are offered:

- the first considers the hypothesized impact that common ESA programs and services are likely to have on the institutional capacity of rural districts as defined in this exercise;
- the second considers the hypothesized impact that ESA programming characteristics are likely to have in assisting rural districts in their efforts to address the school improvement agenda as portrayed in this exercise.

Impact of Current Patterns on Institutional Capacity

The hypothesized impact of common ESA programming practices on the indicators of common strengths and weaknesses in institutional capacity of rural districts is summarized in table 11. A 4-point scale is used to establish the hypothesized impact: very supportive, supportive, limited support, and neutral.

The organizational/structural dimension of the conceptualization of institutional capacity includes both the largest number of indicators of common strengths (4) and the largest number of indicators of common weaknesses (11). Importantly, it is in this dimension where common ESA programming is most prevalent and its hypothesized impact is viewed to be most supportive overall.

The assessment that ESA programming patterns result in greater fiscal effort is based on the assumption that the absence of the numer-

Table 11

Hypothesized Impact of Current ESA Programming on Common Strengths and Weaknesses in Institutional Capacity of Rural Districts

Indicators of Common Strengths and Weaknesses	Hypothesized Impact of Common ESA Programming
Dimension #1: Organizational/Structural Features	
Common Strengths	
1. less thickening of bureaucracy	supportive
2. lower pupil-teacher ratios	neutral
3. lower dropout rates	neutral
4. greater fiscal effort	supportive
Common Weaknesses	
1. less management support services	supportive
2. greater per pupil cost	supportive
3. greater number of teachers teaching outside field	neutral
4. less competitive salaries and benefits	neutral
5. less breadth and depth in secondary program	limited support
6. limited programs and services for special populations	very supportive
7. less availability of instructional support services	supportive
8. less availability of telecommunications technology	limited support
9. less fiscal capacity	limited support
10. higher per pupil costs	limited support
11. less specialized space and equipment for labs	neutral
Dimension #2: Process Features	
Common Strengths (no indicators cited)	
Common Weaknesses	
1. less availability of planning support services	limited support
2. less evaluation support services	limited support
Dimension #3: Cultural Features	
Common Strengths	
1. greater parent involvement	neutral
2. greater community support and identity with school	neutral
Common Weaknesses (no indicators cited)	

ous programming efforts of an ESA would result in even greater pressure on a rural community to support its school district. This same reasoning applies to the assessment that, were it not for the efforts of an ESA, another common weakness of rural districts–higher per pupil costs–would be even more pronounced.

ESA programming practices are judged to be either very supportive, supportive, or of limited support for the vast majority of the eleven indicators of common weaknesses (8 of the 11). As a result, rural districts served by an educational service agency whose programming characteristics follow the common patterns of all state networks are substantially aided in their efforts to remain viable educational organizations.

Impact of Current Patterns on School Improvement Agenda

The second set of observations focuses on the hypothesized impact of current ESA programming practices for assisting rural districts in their school improvement agenda. A summary of the effects of the roles currently played by ESAs in this regard is provided in table 12. A 4-point scale is used to establish the hypothesized impact: very supportive, supportive, somewhat supportive, and neutral.

Current ESA programming practices appear to have some impact on a number of judicial expressions of the need to broaden the concept of equal educational opportunity. The current deep involvement of ESAs in addressing the needs of disabled students, for example, has clearly assisted rural districts in their efforts to achieve access for this population. Moreover, to the extent that ESAs provide enrichment to the educational program of a rural district (e.g., through the provision of numerous instructional support services), then it can be assumed that the service agency provides some assistance to address other judicial expressions as well.

The impact on current ESA programming practices to assist rural districts in responding to national and state policy initiatives is somewhat supportive for several features of the standards movement. The deep involvement of ESAs in both curriculum development and staff development clearly represents a significant resource for rural districts in addressing these two critical components of the rural school improvement agenda.

Table 12
Hypothesized Impact of Current ESA Programming for Assisting Rural Districts in Their School Improvement Agenda

Rural District School Improvement Agenda	Hypothesized Impact of Current ESA Programming
Expansion of the Concept of Equal Educational Opportunity	
• eliminate race as a determinant of access	neutral
• application of due process rights	neutral
• eliminate local wealth as a determinant	somewhat supportive
• eliminate handicapping condition as a determinant	very supportive
• eliminate gender as a determinant	neutral
• eliminate geography as a determinant	somewhat supportive
• introduce adequacy criterion	somewhat supportive
Emerging National and State Policy Initiatives	
• achievement of high standards and accountability (curricular content, student performance, opportunity-to-learn, staff development)	supportive
• site-based management	neutral
• early childhood education	somewhat supportive
• parental involvement and choice	neutral
• education partnership (post-secondary, business, other human services providers)	somewhat supportive
• technology	somewhat supportive
Other Pressures	
• redesign school as community learning center	neutral
• redesign of curriculum to use community as focus	neutral
• engage school in community development	neutral

Chapter 5

What Educational Service Agencies Must Do in the Future: An Overview

The current programming profile of educational service agencies in addressing issues surrounding rural education supports the proposition that many rural districts across the country have benefitted from the presence of a service unit in their region. The deep engagement of virtually all ESAs in providing direct instructional programming and instructional support services for disabled students, for example, has done much to permit large numbers of rural districts to honor their legal and ethical responsibilities to provide these students access to a far richer program than would be possible otherwise. Similarly, those ESAs that provide curriculum development, staff development, and instructional materials services also provide access to resources that are important prerequisites for the enrichment of teaching and learning. Many examples of how ESAs currently strengthen the institutional capacity of rural districts in the area of management support services could also be cited.

While many individual and entire state networks of ESAs have much to be proud of in their current efforts on behalf of rural systems, it is clear that much more will be required in the future. The school improvement agenda outlined previously, even if only partially accepted, and the rural school improvement process will place great demands on ESAs. Though challenging, these demands present an unparalleled opportunity for ESAs to demonstrate that they can be an indispensable, responsive, and accountable first-line support system on behalf of rural districts. Achievement of this goal should also ensure that ESAs will be increasingly viewed in the policy communities as an

indispensable, responsive, and accountable partner in efforts to improve the workings of the entire state system of elementary-secondary education.

The approach used to discuss how regional educational service agencies can be most effective in assisting rural districts begins with suggestions to modify language commonly used in the mission statements of ESAs. This is followed by the identification of three overarching strategic goals ESAs could profitably pursue in fulfillment of their mission to assist rural districts. Each of the three strategic goals is then discussed in greater detail in the following three chapters. This is done by first establishing a number of core objectives that have potential for facilitating attainment of a strategic goal, then citing illustrative promising practices that can be used to achieve a core objective.

Several points are to be noted at the outset of this discussion of proposed modifications in the language of an ESA mission statement, strategic goals, and core objectives. First, the suggested modifications in mission statements are intended to apply to all educational service agencies in the state networks of ESAs, irrespective of the huge diversity that presently exists in the contextual features governing their operations or the equally huge differences present in rural districts. That is, the proposed changes speak to what are regarded to be the new, universal purposes that ought to guide ESAs in their rural school improvement efforts. Second, it is also valid to establish common, universally applicable strategic goals that ESAs, again despite their great diversity, can nonetheless accept as meaningful to achieve their common mission. If it is appropriate to establish common elements of a mission statement and accept universal strategic goals, then it is possible to identify a set of core objectives that hold promise for achieving the (common) strategic goals.

Third, the illustrations of promising practices cited for each core objective are not exhaustive, or necessarily unique, for it is possible in most cases to identify ESAs across the country with a long tradition of engaging in many of these practices. The purpose of providing promising practices is not to fashion an original list, but to illustrate how a core objective can be operationalized. Those ESAs not now so involved might give serious consideration to the potential benefits the activity might hold. Moreover, it is in the design of a specific action plan, flowing from universally held core objectives that in turn spring from universally held strategic goals where the diversity present in the environment in which ESAs function must be reflected. Furthermore, it is here where the unique needs of the rural constituency of a regional educational service agency must be addressed. Therefore, attempting

to prescribe a laundry list of promising practices to illustrate how a core objective could be operationalized would be inappropriate.

Finally, many existing ESAs presently do not possess the organizational capacity to engage in many of the illustrative practices cited, nor are they likely in the near future to be positioned to do so. A host of organizational, staffing, fiscal, and political traditions in a region or state and other factors can serve to constrain their capacity to respond. Most inhibiting factors, no matter how severe, ought not to be a major deterrent. Many of the illustrations cited, for example, lend themselves to collaboration with another ESA, can be sponsored jointly with other public or private sector agencies, or can be contracted for with a public or private agency. Indeed, considering these options has substantial merit regardless of the existing organizational capacity of an ESA.

Modifications in the Central Purposes of Educational Service Agencies

Much of the support for the concept of a regional educational service agency in states where they have been established through enabling legislation has centered on a common vision of intended roles. Language commonly used to express this relatively uniform view typically included the expectation that the creation of ESAs would aid local districts to achieve a high quality efficient program and to achieve equity.

No changes are proposed here in these core ideals and aspirations for ESAs in their role of assisting rural districts in their school improvement efforts, the focus of this exercise. Pursuing the frequently contentious and difficult-to-achieve twin policy goals of excellence and equity should always remain central to the work of ESAs, as it must for any organization in public education.

The ambitious rural school improvement agenda outlined previously, however, suggests that modifications be made in the central purposes of ESAs. The new pressures on rural districts, and those on public elementary-secondary education generally, also require that more ESAs pursue the twin goals of excellence and equity in a more disciplined, systemic way.

New pressures suggest that more ESAs accept these additional visions of their role to aid rural districts in their service region to establish an educational program that is accountable to students, the community that provides support for the districts, and to the state. And, more ESAs need to aggressively exercise the unique leadership

role they are positioned to play in the educational community and in other policy arenas in the region and beyond.

A number of existing ESAs across the country could be singled out as having always reflected these additional ideals in their mission statements and having designed policies and programming activities that demonstrate a commitment to these broadened aspirations. In these exemplary cases, the mission statement is not viewed in the same way as the claims of some critics of planning, particularly strategic planning, who maintain that mission statements are somewhat like the platforms of political parties that tend to be content-free and ignored once adopted. The modifications in the central purposes of ESAs represent an ambitious challenge that would likely please Cook (1988), who maintains that if mission statements are to be meaningful, they must be a "bold declaration of what the organization will be" (p. 91). Based on past performance, however, many other ESAs would have difficulty accepting the broader ideals proposed here.

There will, of course, be common as well as differing approaches used by individual state networks or individual service agencies in a state network as they strive to operationalize the proposed modifications. Acceptance of the broader, more structured central purposes is nonetheless viewed as essential if ESAs are to meaningfully support rural districts in their school improvement efforts.

The Three Strategic Goals ESAs Should Pursue

Educational service agencies can demonstrate a commitment to the broader vision held for them by pursuing three strategic goals. As shown in figure 6, ESAs can play a vital supportive role in three ways:

- Enhancing the institutional capacity of rural districts to successfully address their school improvement agenda;
- Enhancing the ability of rural districts and their communities to successfully engage in a sustained school improvement process that will result in achievement of their school improvement agenda; and
- Exercising a leadership role for advancing education in the region that will impact school improvement efforts of all local districts, not just rural.

A discussion of each of the three proposed strategic goals is provided in the following three chapters. Core objectives to achieve each strategic goal are also presented, as are illustrations of promising practices with potential to achieve each objective.

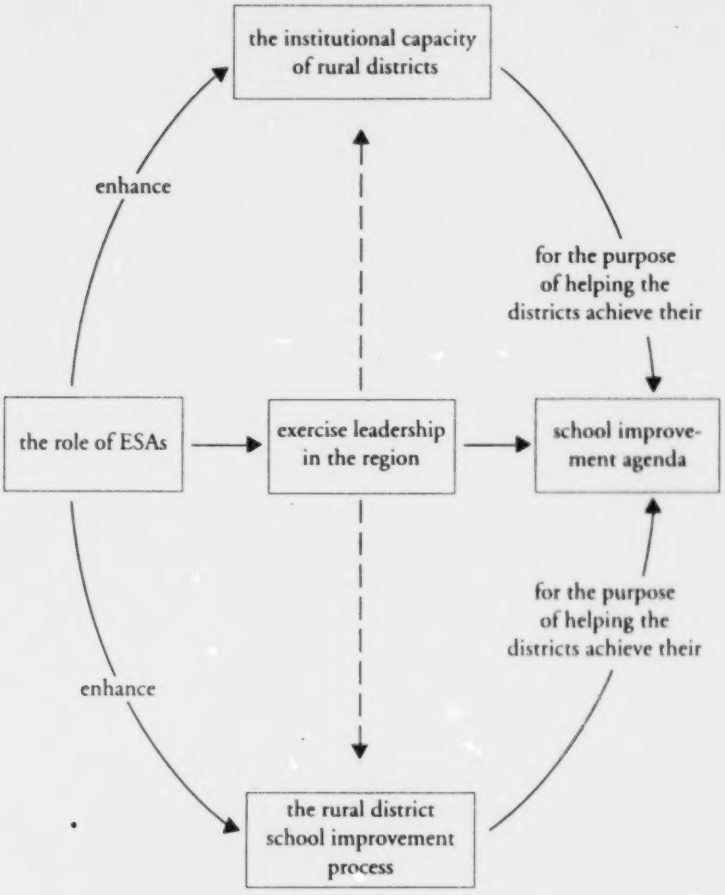
the institutional capacity of rural districts
enhance
for the purpose of helping the districts achieve their
the role of ESAs
exercise leadership in the region
school improvement agenda
for the purpose of helping the districts achieve their
enhance
the rural district school improvement process

Figure 6. The Three Strategic Goals of ESA Involvement in Rural District School Improvement Efforts

CHAPTER 6

Strategic Goal 1: Enhancing the Institutional Capacity of Rural Districts

Educational service agencies are ideally positioned to serve as a first-line support system to enhance the institutional capacity of rural districts as they strive to respond to the school improvement agenda. That many rural districts are in need of substantial support is an understatement of the first order. Rural districts are constrained by a number of common weaknesses, especially in their organizational/structural features and in the processes used in planning and assessment. Equally important, rural districts tend to exhibit a number of common strengths in their organizational/structural features and in the culture of the district and communities served that must be capitalized on by an ESA. A discussion of ways that an ESA can fulfill this first of the three proposed strategic goals is provided below.

Approach Used

The approach used to develop the discussion of an ESA's role in enhancing the institutional capacity of rural districts begins by identifying core objectives that, if not now assumed, ought to be considered. Illustrative promising practices are then cited for each core objective.

Five Core Objectives Established

Five core objectives are established:

1. Provide special student populations access to instructional program-

ming and instructional support services not feasible at individual district site(s).

2. Provide general populations of students and adults access to instructional programming and instructional support services not feasible at individual district site(s).
3. Promote access to appropriate use of telecommunication technologies that enhance teaching and learning not feasible at individual district site(s).
4. Promote cost saving practices and access to external revenue enhancement funding sources that contribute to the efficient and effective use of district fiscal resources in support of teaching and learning.
5. Promote comprehensive, timely assessments of student performance, and program and district effectiveness.

Discussion of Core Objectives

Access for Disabled Students

The difficulties facing rural districts in addressing the needs of disabled students are well documented. Most of these obstacles have their origin in common weaknesses in the institutional capacity of the districts (e.g., less fiscal capacity, higher per pupil cost, less availability of instructional support services). Moreover, the lower prevalency rates typically found in rural districts, a function of another common feature, small enrollment size, also complicate attempts to mount a meaningful and appropriate educational experience for many students with disabilities.

What progress rural systems have made in the past in this regard can likely be attributed to numerous federal and state incentives and other forms of encouragement over the past several decades that have prompted them to engage in a collaborative with neighboring districts. Educational service agencies in many states have been involved for a long time in state planning to encourage collaboration. In other states, the state has mandated that, in certain situations, rural systems must use an ESA to provide programming for the disabled student.[11]

Though virtually all ESAs have for some time been involved in serving the disabled student, there continue to be great variations in the nature and scope of the programs and services offered rural districts (Fletcher, Cole, & Strumor, 1990; Stephens, 1979). Not all of

the 13 categories of disability currently identified as eligible for services in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act, for example, appear to be provided access. Moreover, there continue to be great variations in a disabled student's access to important instructional support services, either those offered by an educational service agency or by an individual rural system.

This country must not abandon its commitment to serve disabled students, nor is it likely to be allowed to do so by the courts. While still beset by numerous issues (e.g., the contemporary debate over inclusion), the progress made over the past several decades is perhaps one of the greatest, but largely unheralded, success stories in the recent history of public education in this nation. In many states, much of this progress can be attributed to the efforts of ESAs.

Despite these advances, there is still much to do. Not only are ESAs ideally situated to continue to play a key role here, but it is also likely that much of the past support for ESAs, especially in the policy communities, stems from their involvement. This adds an additional incentive for an ESA to continue to be one of the prime educational resources in the region addressing the educational needs of the disabled.

Illustrative promising practices. Examples of promising practices in which an ESA can engage to assist rural districts who, for whatever reason, are unable to fulfill their obligation to serve disabled students are the following:

- provide teachers and consultants for direct instruction of disabled students (e.g., the mentally retarded, the hard-of-hearing and deaf, the visually impaired, the emotionally disturbed, the learning disabled, the orthopedically impaired, the housebound);
- provide diagnostic and clinical services for disabled students; and
- provide instructional support services, such as school social work, school psychological services, counseling and guidance, curriculum development, staff development, or instructional materials for disabled students.

Access for General Students and Adults

The rationale for an ESA to pursue this second core objective is in many respects similar to the preceding discussion. Many rural districts do not now possess the institutional capacity nor are they likely to be able to justify offering a comprehensive program for students who will enter the labor market upon graduation or offer a comprehensive enrichment program for the gifted and talented.

Similarly, rural districts commonly face huge fiscal, staffing, and

other obstacles in sponsoring instructional support services that can enrich teaching and learning or, in some cases (e.g., professional development), are absolute prerequisites to attain high standards.

Many ESAs have provided students access to more meaningful educational experiences not feasible in their home school districts. More will be required of all ESAs in the future, however, if more students attending rural districts are to have an "opportunity to learn" that which they are expected to master in order to have a productive and rewarding life.

Illustrative promising practices. Examples of ways that an ESA can enrich the educational experiences of students other than the disabled include the sponsoring of specialized regional programs such as vocational/technical, occupational education, gifted and talented, early childhood, outdoor/environmental, adult education, and providing instructional support services such as professional development, curriculum development, counseling and guidance, and health education.

Professional and curriculum development efforts by an ESA should focus on those priorities established in a rural district's school improvement agenda. Though local districts will differ as to how they will approach this issue, it is likely they will seek assistance in curriculum development and parallel professional development in those curriculum content areas included in their state reform initiatives. At least 32 states have developed curricular content standards in at least some of the nine areas established in the National Education Goals (i.e., English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography) and 14 others report having standards development underway. (*National Education Goals Panel*, 1996, p. 3). These are the areas then that ought to receive much of the attention in an ESA's curriculum and professional development efforts.

Access to Telecommunications Technologies

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 provides for access to advanced telecommunications services for all schools and libraries, as well as *rural* health care providers. Advanced telecommunications is defined to mean any commercially available telecommunications service, so that local entities can select options that match their needs. Schools might install a T-1 line to provide video links to permit teleconferencing or a DS-3 system to provide high quality, full motion video.

Schools and libraries will receive discounts ranging from 20 to 90 percent, depending on two characteristics of their locales: free-and-

reduced-price-meal rates and rural locale. Discounts are higher for impoverished locales and rural locales, although poverty is the main factor that determines the discount. Discounts *will* cover the cost of inside wiring; the Act specifically requires that telecommunications be accessible from *classrooms*. Equal access to telecommunications also means equal access to information. Opportunities abound, for example:

- listservs for areas of interest to students and teachers;
- chat rooms for students and teachers to communicate with persons of similar interest;
- bibliographic databases such as ERIC and the Library of Congress;
- virtual libraries for research;
- video technology that provides for visual contact at very low cost, such as CuSeeMe;
- Internet phone calling worldwide at little cost;
- video conferencing for group discussion;
- E-mail for written documentation and instantaneous communication;
- sending files and pictures for projects;
- students working interactively on a "white board" to solve a problem;
- students accessing FAQs (frequently asked questions) about an area of interest;
- seeking help from experts;
- satellite delivery of instruction to students and teachers;
- interactive CD-ROMs that contain encyclopedic information;
- networks within and between schools for sharing electronic information and tools; and
- intra- and interlibrary programs.

These are some examples of existing opportunities for students and teachers in rural locales–new developments are forthcoming almost daily. The Telecommunications Act and the explosive development and accessability of the Internet at low cost may positively affect the quality of learning and schooling in the next decade.

Illustrative promising practices. Examples of ways that an ESA can advance achievement of this core objective are to sponsor access to distance learning technologies that can enrich the instructional program available to rural students; enhance and broaden professional development opportunities for the staff of rural districts; participate in

interactive television programming delivered via satellite and cable; sponsor on-line access to E-mail, to the Internet, and to other databases for rural district students and staff; and provide technical assistance and professional development in teaching and learning with available telecommunication technologies.

The value of distance learning technologies for enriching curricular offerings and professional development opportunities has been stressed by Hobbs (1985), who argued that "these technologies have the capability of delivering whole chunks of education over space in a cost effective way" (p. 11). Barker (1986), whose work over the years has done much to advance the quality of the discussions concerning distance learning, speaks of its potential as an equalizer for rural districts.

The sponsorship of on-line access to the Internet and to other databases can enrich teaching and learning in rural systems in numerous ways. Having rural staff able to communicate with professional colleagues anywhere and to have access to information and resources anywhere is breathtaking. Similarly, students accessing a variety of resources germane to a problem they are working on is equally exciting.

The need to provide technical assistance and professional development on the appropriate use of available telecommunication technologies in a region seems indisputable. The success in addressing what has been popularly labeled "the readiness gap" will obviously determine the ultimate success of the technical assistance and professional development efforts of an ESA, no matter how creatively these have been fashioned.

The role proposed here, while valuable, is nonetheless in many respects a modest one. In a recent editorial, Samulson (1993) observed that "the superhighway, so to speak, mostly exists; what's missing are local roads..." (p. 56). Gooler (1995) helped identify the nature and composition of these local roads with his four "ities" (connectivity, interactivity, supportability, and feasibility) (pp. 56-57). The proposed ESA role at best addresses some of Gooler's "ities," and thus adds to the construction of at least part of the local roads in what Samulson had in mind with his "superhighway." Whatever the case, this much is true: sponsoring access to distance learning technologies and on-line communication contributes to Cleveland's (1985) view that the rapid pace of information technologies development will result in "the passing of remoteness" (p. 185) in vast nonmetropolitan regions.

Promote Cost-Savings and Related Practices

Providing assistance to cut costs for rural districts has traditionally

been perceived as one of the quintessential functions of an ESA. For example, the engagement of an ESA in the three preceding core objectives would result in cost-savings for a rural district. But, there are other ways that an ESA can potentially contribute to both additional savings and revenue enhancement efforts. Educational service agencies and state policy communities must pursue every possible way to address the limited fiscal capacity that contributes to overall weaknesses in many rural systems' institutional capacity.

Illustrative promising practices. Examples of promising practices that can contribute to cost savings include sponsoring a comprehensive cooperative purchasing program or a comprehensive professional development program on fiscal planning and management; providing technical assistance in fiscal planning and management; sponsoring money-flow studies of expenditure patterns; and administering selected rural district management functions.

Examples of promising revenue enhancement practices are providing information services on the availability of state, federal, and foundation grants; providing technical assistance in grant writing; and commissioning studies on the effects on rural districts of state and federal funding formulas.

Several examples of cost-saving practices and one illustration of a revenue enhancement practice warrant brief comment. ESAs all across this nation have for a very long time demonstrated that financial savings can be realized through local district participation in a cooperative purchasing program.[12] Some of the more comprehensive of these existing programs include in their menus a full range of consumable instructional supplies and materials, as well as costly instructional equipment. Some ESAs in recent years have also offered health insurance programs at substantial savings to participating districts. A few are also known to have extended participation eligibility to local governments, and have thus increased further their competitive position in dealings with suppliers and manufacturers.

The urging that ESAs engage in money-flow studies of expenditure patterns is based on the belief that there will be increasing pressure from policy communities for school districts to fully document for their residents and for state and federal funding sources that expenditures are, in fact, used for improvements in teaching and learning. Substantial progress is being made in designing budget analysis techniques to achieve this goal. While work on a more meaningfully detailed expenditure reporting system has been under way for several years at such places as the University of Michigan (Educational Studies Pro-

gram, 1995), these efforts have recently been given high visibility by the work supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Center for Workplace Preparation (Coopers & Lybrand, L.L. P., 1995).

The availability of more sophisticated budget reporting methods will pressure budgeting practices to be more closely aligned with the standards movement and other priorities of the school improvement agenda. This goal is, of course, one of the centerpieces of the systemic reform movement. It is one of the policy components that will provide state policy makers with what the Education Commission of the States (1992) refers to as high-leverage strategies for systemic reform. Added pressure will also come from one of the features currently supported in the reform movement–site-based management. As Odden (1994) suggested, education policy, including finance policy, may increasingly be focused on schools, not districts.[13] Conducting money-flow studies as a cost-saving practice is based on the belief that most school districts can and must discover additional ways to reallocate and more effectively concentrate existing resources to support teaching and learning.

Recommending that an ESA administer selected rural district management functions is not a new proposal (Stephens & Turner, 1991), but an idea whose time has again come. Potentially promising rural district management functions that could transfer to an ESA include data processing activities (e.g., budget accounting and reporting, student scheduling, property inventory), student performance records processing, and the scheduling of transportation services. As I have argued in the past, an ESA might assume all of the instructional and management support services for those districts having an enrollment of less than approximately 300 to 500. On-site leadership in these instances could be provided by a local administrator. Policy development would of course remain with the local board of education. Implementation of the illustrations cited above have potential cost savings for a rural system and for enhancing the quality of services, as well.

The recommendation that an ESA commission studies of state and federal funding formulas to enhance revenue is especially warranted at this time, when it is likely that block grants are to become even more prominent as the preferred method to distribute most of the federal government's big-ticket programs in education and related areas. Population data are likely to continue to be weighted heavily in determining a state's block grant. As Reeder (1992) has cautioned, this heavy weighting will serve to bias against places with "high and low population density" (p. 46). It is also likely that federal block grants will be

administered out of the governor's office, a process more subject to political influence than one administered in state education agencies (Stephens, 1995b).

ESAs have a vital role to play to contribute to the development of information on the effects of new and existing federal and state funding practices. Their help in ensuring that funding practices are equitable and adequate has the potential to serve as a revenue enhancement strategy on behalf of all districts in their service region.

Promote Comprehensive Assessments

The rationale for an ESA to assist rural districts in promoting comprehensive assessments of student performance and program effectiveness is grounded in the same line of argument framing much of this proposal. It has to do with a common weakness in rural systems–the lack of adequate instructional and management support systems. Current pressures to make all school districts–urban, suburban, and rural–accountable for the performance of their students will clearly continue, if not accelerate further, in the years ahead. Similarly, the need for all school districts, including rural systems, to demonstrate that programs they endorse are effective will not likely lessen. Equally important, rural districts need valid information on their students, the effectiveness of programs, and the district in order to implement strategies for improvement, irrespective of external pressures for greater accountability.

Illustrative promising practices. Examples of ways that an ESA can promote the achievement of this core objective are to provide technical assistance and professional development in

- *student performance assessment* to ensure that assessment activities undertaken by a district are not only aligned with the curricular-content areas established by the state, but are also of high standards;
- *program assessment* to ensure that assessment activities undertaken by a district are of high standards; and
- *school district assessment* to ensure that activities undertaken by a district are of high standards.

Providing technical assistance and professional development in student performance assessment is especially needed to analyze test results a district is required by the state to use or independently chooses to use. Otherwise, test results remain data, not information that can be used to inform teaching and learning. When a district has the option to either establish its own assessment program or implement a state prescribed program, there is then a need to provide assistance in

making these choices from among criterion- or norm-referenced tests or from authentic/alternative assessments available in a large number of forms (e.g., portfolio assessment, demonstrations).

Providing technical assistance and professional development for both program assessment and school district assessment is also needed to ensure that a district's plans and programs that were established to meet its school improvement agenda are, in fact, achieving predetermined outcomes.

Assistance in assessing how well a district is accomplishing its goals (in a number of areas) in its school improvement plan not addressed in other core objectives will also be needed. Especially important are assessments of the move toward site-based management, the development of parental and other partnerships, the development of the school as a community learning center, the use of the community as a curriculum focus, and the engagement of the school in community development.

To be most effective, technical assistance and professional development must address the relative strengths and weaknesses of different quantitative and qualitative approaches for the assessment and evaluation of a particular program or school district. Using an appropriate design is, of course, an absolute requirement for a valid assessment of any type. On this matter, there is no disagreement.

CHAPTER 7

Strategic Goal 2: Enhancing the Ability of Rural Districts and Communities to Engage in a School Improvement Process

The ability of rural districts to engage in a sustained school improvement process is of central importance in their efforts to be successful. The burden for moving a district and community through the various phases of a strategic planning process tailored to meet the needs of the local district must rest with local leadership. In most situations, there is likely to be little in the way of sustainable progress in rural school improvement unless there is similar movement in the development of a sustainable rural community process. Such is the nature of the interdependence of rural districts and the communities they serve.

Complicating this matter further, rural communities frequently confront what Cigler (1984) referred to as a lack of "management capacity" (p. 541). Cigler's observation was primarily directed at the relative absence of expertise in rural local governments. However, the likely causes of this common situation (e.g., lack of training opportunities in management and planning, difficulty in justifying and supporting employment of specialists in core management support areas) would appear to apply equally to the situation commonly found in rural districts.

Three Core Objectives Established

It is in this context that this second strategic goal for educational service agencies is proposed. Three core objectives are established:

1. Strengthen the capacity-building competencies and skills of district and community leadership engaged in all phases of strategic planning.
2. Provide technical assistance to assess the condition of a rural district and of a rural community that should then frame much of their strategic planning activities.
3. Provide independent, third-party assessments of implementation activities undertaken by the district.

Where these three core objectives fall in the approach to the school improvement process used here is shown in table 13.

Table 13
Proposed Role of ESAs in the Rural District School Improvement Process

School Improvement Process	Proposed Role of ESAs
Phase 1: Get started	
• Mobilize the school and community	strengthen capacity-building competencies and skills of district and community leadership to engage in all phases of strategic planning
Phase 2: Develop strategic plan	
• Establish guidance system	
• Develop strategic policies	
• Conduct critical analysis	
• Generate long-range goals	provide technical assistance in completion of competition, stakeholder, threat, and opportunity analyses, and planning assumptions
• Establish short-range objectives	
• Establish strategies for achievement of goals and objectives	
• Develop action plans	
• Establish planning controls	
• Develop evaluation plan	
Phase 3: Implement action plan	
Phase 4: Monitor implementation plan	provide third-party assessments of implementation plans and activities
Phase 5: Institutionalize school improvement plans	

Discussion of Core Objectives

Develop Capacity-Building

One of the most valued contributions that can be made to enhance the effectiveness and quality of public sector organizations is to provide assistance and resources to strengthen the capacity-building competencies and skills of its members. Not unlike other constructs, however, capacity-building can have various meanings for different individuals. I tend to favor Honadale's (1980) definition:

> Capacity-building means institutionalizing in public sector organizations the ability to anticipate and influence external changes impacting the organization, make informed policy choices, manage resources wisely, evaluate what the organization now does, and make appropriate planning decisions concerning the organization's future (p. 576).

Brown's (1980) discussion of the capacity-building requirements needed by rural local governments is also instructive:

> Capacity building differs from the traditional technical assistance approach in several ways. In the first place, it requires a continuing and intimate relationship between the source of assistance and the recipient. This contrasts with the more *ad hoc*, periodic, and formal character of the traditional approach. In the second place, a broader, community-wide perspective rather than a narrow problem perspective is required in approaching community problems. In the third place, capacity building places as much emphasis on teaching and educating as on doing in helping a community solve its problems. Finally, in the fourth place, this approach involves a greater degree of risk-taking and investment of resources in low visibility, "soft" programs by the technical assistance agency than is presently required under the traditional approach (p. 21).

Honadale's and Brown's (1980) perspectives are not too unlike the proposed rural district school improvement process used here. This proposed core objective calls for an ESA to strengthen the capacity-building competencies and skills of district and community leadership to make informed decisions and take appropriate action during each of the five phases of the process. While much of this work must occur at the critical first phase of the process, it is also likely to be necessary and helpful at other critical stages as well.

There are no shortcuts for an ESA to provide necessary resources or staff time to develop the competencies and skills of local leadership

necessary for them to engage in all phases of the process. Indeed, the best course to follow would be to delay proceeding into some of the more technically-oriented aspects until satisfied the leadership cadre has the ability to successfully engage in all facets of the process. Moving cautiously here has the added benefit of regularly testing, in relatively rigorous ways, the commitment of the local leadership to work the plan through. The deep commitment of the local leadership and community to successfully implement their vision of the mission is, of course, an absolute precondition for success.

Critical Analysis of District and Community

The second core objective proposed for ESAs is that they provide technical assistance to a rural district and community by conducting a critical analysis of each. As discussed previously, the function of a critical analysis is to identify, analyze, and evaluate key characteristics and trends, both within and outside the district and community, that may impact the agreed-to mission of the rural school district.

The critical analysis of both the internal and external environments can take several forms. At a minimum, it should probably consist of an assessment of the major strengths and weaknesses of services, programs, activities, and products that the rural district currently provides; a competition analysis; a stakeholders' analysis; a threat analysis; an opportunity analysis; and preparing planning assumptions based on the one internal and four external assessments.

An example of the recommended content and scope of a rural district profile, along with examples of data useful in making assessments of the current condition in each content area, is provided in table 14. The outline follows that established earlier as the conceptual framework to define the institutional capacity of a rural district.

A number of approaches are available for profiling the current conditions of a rural community. Common content areas are included in many of these, along with examples of data typically collected in each content area, as shown in table 15 (p. 84).

In addition to providing assistance in establishing the content and scope of district and community profiles, the ESA could be helpful in assisting with the selection and use of appropriate methodologies to conduct various required assessments. Assistance is likely to be useful, for example, in a district's assessment of student outcomes, such as with the disaggregation–gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status–of student performance scores on standardized tests. Similarly, technical assistance may help a rural community decide to conduct an assessment of citizens' perceptions of the quality of community services. Assistance here may be necessary to design sampling procedures,

Table 14
Recommended Content Areas to Be Included in Rural District Profiles

Content Areas	Illustrative Data
Organizational/ Structural Features	
Governance subsystem	Types and quality of board activities (perhaps using a critical incident method); board stability; community participation
Management subsystem	Availability and quality of management services; role and function of leadership personnel; quality-of-work-life measures
Student subsystem	Demographic characteristics; student performance measures; measures of student behavior and attitudes; postschool outcome measures; quality-of-work-life measures
Staffing subsystem	Training, certification, and experience; teaching loads; salary and benefits; staff stability; quality-of-work-life measures
Instructional subsystem	Availability and quality of early childhood, elementary, middle, and senior high programs; availability and quality of honors and A/P courses; availability and quality of cocurricular program
Instructional support subsystem	Availability and quality of supervision and evaluation services; availability and quality of services related to library/media, counseling and public health, personnel, and staff development
Financial subsystem	Fiscal capacity; fiscal effort; revenue and expenditure patterns and trends
Facilities and equipment subsystem	Availability and quality of general purpose facilities; and specialized facilities and equipment for science, math, and technology
Process Features	The processes used and quality of planning, directing, organizing, and evaluating decisions made by the district (perhaps using a critical incident method)
Cultural Features	The basic assumptions and beliefs shared by members of the district and community concerning the mission of the district, its internal relationships, and its relationship to its environment; measures of parent and community support for school district

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Table 15
Common Content Areas Included in Rural Community Profiles

Content Areas	Illustrative Data
Population	Population characteristics, population trends, income characteristics, household characteristics, educational characteristics
Economy	Employment characteristics and trends, occupational characteristics and trends, community employment patterns
Local and substate regional governments serving the local community	Type and quality of services and facilities, revenue and expenditure characteristics and trends, and fiscal capacity and fiscal effort of local government
Community services	Type and quality of health and social services and facilities available in the public and private sectors to children and youth, and to the general population
Educational services (other than local district)	Type and quality of early childhood and adult education and post-secondary programs and services in the public and private sector
Cultural resources	Type and quality of cultural programs and facilities in the public and private sectors
Recreational resources	Type and quality of recreational programs and facilities in the public and private sectors
Transportation resources	Type and quality of road network, services, facilities in the public and private sectors
Formal and informal community organizations	Cultural, religious, service, fraternal and sororal, professional, labor, and other formal and informal interest groups

construct survey instruments, develop interview protocols, and construct other conventional ways to measure the quality of public services.

Assessment of Implementation Plans

The third proposed objective of ESA involvement in a rural district's school improvement process is that it provide an independent, third-party assessment of the district's implementation plans and activities. The staff of an ESA are in an ideal position to play this needed role. They ordinarily will be knowledgeable about the overall process, following its progress through the planning and development stages, yet they will not be too vested in the process.

Chapter 8

Strategic Goal 3: Provide Leadership for the Advancement of Education in the Region

The challenges confronting the staff of an educational service agency committed to achieving the preceding two strategic goals will require exemplary leadership competencies and skills generally attributed to effective leadership. The frequent references in the hoped-for role of an ESA to serve as a conveyor, a facilitator, and a coach and to exercise leadership in the other roles cited all require that the staff possess a broad range of conceptual, human, and technical skills in planning, organizing, directing, and evaluating the work of the agency in advancing education in the region.

There are still other leadership roles that the ESA staff should play that are not directly associated with the provision of a program or service, as is the dominant orientation of the first two strategic goals. Guthrie and Reed's (1991) definition of a leader and then of a strategic leader comes very close to what is proposed here. According to Guthrie and Reed, "a leader is an individual who accepts the authoritative expectations of others to responsibly guide the activities and enhance the performance of an organization" (p. 10). They defined a strategic leader as:

> an individual who attempts to meet these expectations for an organization by incorporating into his or her day-to-day thinking and overall management posture the constellation of practices which constitute strategic planning. (p. 10)

The addition of "regional" to "organization" in Guthrie and Reed's definition of a leader and of a strategic leader captures well the intent

that ESA staff exercise additional leadership roles beyond those directly associated with provision of programs and services. Further, several symbolic terms used by Mintzberg (1973) in his seminal study of the roles played by managers also add insight to what is recommended: figurehead, liaison, disseminator, speaker, entrepreneur, disturbance handler, and negotiator (pp. 92-93). These terms also capture what will be in great demand in order to achieve the core objectives proposed.

Cunningham and Payzant's (1983) discussion of leadership skills necessary in the future also is useful for establishing the nature of the demands being proposed here for the work of an ESA in managing its own affairs as an organization and in its role of exercising leadership for advancing education. The eight leadership skills stressed by these authors are (1) focusing on the present and future simultaneously; (2) bridging between and among many sectors of interest; (3) mixed screening, monitoring, and interpreting; (4) adapting to sustained changes; (5) appraising environments; (6) utilizing intuition; (7) decision-making policy development skills; and (8) managing symbols (pp. 12-21).

Finally, two of the four broad categories of educational leadership identified by Griffiths, Stout, and Forsyth (1988) also have utility. One of the two urges leaders to "exercise the wisest kind of political behavior by resolving the conflicting demands of many constituents, and, in turn, gaining their support for education" (p. 7). While conflict-resolution skills were cited by both Mintzberg (1973) and Cunningham and Payzant (1983), the explicit reference to "political behavior" and clearly identifying "gaining support for education" as an object of engaging in political activity is preferred. The second of the two broad categories of what leaders must do is equally useful: "They must symbolize education in the community. Through their public statements they must express, project, and embody the purpose and character of public education" (p. 7).

Leadership roles to be performed by educational service agencies in the region are reflected in the core objectives cited below. These expectations are admittedly demanding, but so too is the equally compelling need that all organizations having a charter to improve public education devote all of their energies toward the achievement of this goal. The assumption of additional leadership roles, beyond those embodied in the previously discussed strategic goals, can contribute substantially to the education advancement in the region.

Approach Used Stresses Regional, Not Rural, Focus

A discussion of the core objectives established for strategic goal 3 follows. The approach used is both similar and different from that used to develop the discussion of both of the preceding strategic goals (i.e., enhancing the institutional capacity of rural districts, enhancing the ability of rural districts to engage in a school improvement process).

A similar feature of the discussions of the first two strategic goals is the inclusion of illustrative promising practices to achieve each core objective. It is to be emphasized again, however, that the examples cited do not represent an exhaustive nor necessarily unique list of potential activities. Further, as was true of strategic goal 2, it is assumed that the acceptance by an ESA of each core objective will indirectly address the school improvement agenda outlined previously.

Where this discussion differs from the preceding two is critical. Previously a clear focus was on potential ways ESAs can assist *rural districts* in their school improvement efforts. The emphasis here, however, is on the leadership role of the ESAs to advance education in its *entire service region.* This focus is made for several reasons that are summarized below.

- Many educational service agencies also serve larger urban and suburban districts, in addition to rural systems, and it is in the ability of an ESA to help concentrate the resources of the entire elementary-secondary educational community and other resources that offer the greatest potential to advance education in the region.
- While rural districts have unique needs, they also share many similarities with their urban and suburban counterparts; the most obvious one, of course, is that the school improvement agenda being framed by judicial action and national and state policy initiatives does not make distinctions in the type of district expected to respond.
- Much good would result by adopting a regional perspective to develop plans that address not only regional education issues, but related social and economic issues.

Other potential indirect benefits from aligning the interests of rural districts alongside their urban and suburban counterparts are also possible. Though equally difficult to measure, there does seem to be face validity to the argument that doing so:

- would contribute to the creation of a healthier climate for school improvement efforts for all districts in the region–urban, suburban, and rural;

- would contribute to providing a more balanced discussion of the condition of education in all of the region; while the work of Bracey (1991, 1992), Berliner (1992), and Robinson and Brandon (1992) in particular has done much to weaken the misinformation about public education that has dominated much of the recent national debate, there is still a desperate need for more reasoned, balanced dialogue concerning what ails public education and what steps need to be taken to bring about needed improvements; and
- to the extent that an ESA, in the exercise of its leadership role, adopts a regional perspective and contributes to both a healthier climate and more balanced debate, then it can be assumed that doing so will contribute further to creating a more favorable culture that is supportive of public education in the region, wherever it takes place.

Thus the regional focus of this strategic goal not only gives adequate attention to rural districts, but should add to the ability of an ESA to serve its rural district constituency in many important additional, but less obvious, ways.

Four Core Objectives Established

Four core objectives are proposed as ways that an educational service agency can achieve the third strategic goal of providing leadership to advance education in the region:

1. Create, and then fervently nourish, regional communities of learners within the education community, and also among educational and other public private human services providers for the purpose of sharing common professional interests to advance education in the region.
2. Create, and then fervently nourish, a critical mass of individuals from both the public and private sectors to serve in an alliance dedicated to the advancement of education and community development in the region.
3. Serve as an advocate for the advancement of education in the region.
4. Serve as a prototype educational organization in the region committed to the promotion of high standards of quality and effectiveness and subject to rigorous standards of accountability in its own operations.

Discussion of Core Objectives

A discussion of each of the four core objectives is presented below. Established first for each is a brief rationale for why an ESA ought to accept the core objective as part of its strategic goal to provide leadership for the advancement of education in the region. Each discussion of a core objective is followed by a listing of a few illustrative promising practices in which an ESA might engage.

Regional Communities of Learners

The present emphasis on the need for and importance of viewing schools as communities of learners is one of the richest concepts to emerge in the systemic reform movement. To affect educational change, teachers, students, and other members of the professional community must be engaged in continuous learning.

If the concept has merit at the local school level, as it most assuredly does, it would seem to be equally meritorious to extend it to a regional level. For example, Hawley (1994), who prefers to use the equally rich term "learning organizations," offers a number of characteristics of such organizations that include time for teachers to reflect with other teachers and support personnel on new approaches to facilitate student learning; using computer networking to access expert advice and research findings on exemplary practices; and having opportunities to observe effective practices they want to know more about. An ESA could serve as a marketplace of ideas in the region, a concept I have promoted for some time, long before being introduced to the rich terms of the systemic reform movement (e.g., community of learners, learning communities).

As cited earlier, the importance of networking is also stressed in a report of the National Network of Regional Educational Laboratories (1995), that included a synthesis of critical factors promoting the implementation of innovations and the institutionalization of change in schools. As mentioned in chapter 4, the critical role that networking can play is also stressed by Olson (1994) in a summary of interviews with key figures of the major "scaling-up" reform initiatives in the nation.

An ESA is in an ideal position to lead in creating and nourishing networks of regional communities of learners within the education community and also between the education community and other public and private human services providers in the region. There are several major strengths an ESA can bring to such efforts. First, its engagement in the first two strategic goals establishes a number of the building blocks (organizational capacity) that should facilitate its as-

suming the leadership role as part of the mainstream of its routine activities (e.g., the content and process competencies and skills required to engage in the frequently cited provision of technical assistance and professional development). Second, its engagement in this leadership role would ordinarily be viewed as a logical exercise of its enabling legislation or charter, thus ordinarily reducing the paralyzing effects of turf issues. Third, it possesses a unique perspective of the region's resources that can be brought to bear in nourishing the regional communities of learners. Fourth, it ordinarily is in a relatively more favorable position to broker and leverage fiscal and human resources to support regional communities of learners.

Illustrative promising practices. Examples of promising practices for achieving this first core objective include sponsoring periodic forums, panels, and symposia. Such gatherings could take place in person or by using appropriate telecommunications technologies. Convening groups could include various subject areas, grade levels, or positional interest groups in the education community, or could include a combination of the education community and other public and private human services providers in the region. Other examples could include:

- sponsoring periodic newsletters for special interest groups;
- establishing a clearinghouse for the collection and dissemination of professional information of interest to various groups;
- organizing, administering, and underwriting a program that would have small, rotating groups of teachers and leadership personnel spend extended time in on-site visits to exemplary programs or schools, or at other public or private sector organizations or institutions engaged in activities to enrich teaching and learning;
- organizing and underwriting a program that would have small, rotating groups of teachers and leadership personnel attend annual meetings of appropriate national professional associations; and
- organizing and administering a program that celebrates exemplary student, teacher, leadership, and school or district performance (or where such program(s) now are sponsored by others, seeking joint sponsorship).

Nourish Other Support in the Region

Much of the preceding rationale supporting an ESA leadership role in creating and nourishing special interest groups in the education community and between the education community and those of other public and private human services providers applies equally well to this second core objective.

Where this objective differs, however, is in its focus. As opposed to an emphasis on organizing and then nourishing a community of learners along special interest lines, this objective seeks to create a critical mass of individuals representing organizations, institutions, local governments, and private citizens dedicated to advancing education in the broadest sense. Moreover, the intent differs in that the object is to create a partnership with an agenda to promote the general condition of education in the region, not special interests.

Illustrative promising practices. Examples of promising practices for achieving this objective include sponsoring a regional voluntary alliance of organizations, institutions, local governments, and private citizens dedicated to the advancement of education in the region, and sponsoring periodic symposia on contemporary or projected policy issues impacting the region.

Serve as an Advocate for Education

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (Morris, 1982) defines advocacy as the "active support, as a cause, idea, or policy" (p. 82), and an advocate as "a person who argues for a cause, supporter or defender," and "a person who pleads in another's behalf..." (p. 82). While many of the proposed preceding roles of an ESA would clearly represent the "active support" of education in the region, there is much more that an ESA is uniquely positioned to do to "argue for a cause" and "plead in another's behalf."

Much of the preceding rationale for an ESA's acceptance of the first two core objectives argues for its acceptance of a literal interpretation of the terms advocacy and advocate, and will not be restated again here. What is important to note, however, is that two categories of active support and arguing for a cause are needed. One level focuses on an ESA's advocacy role in the region, the other on its advocacy role in external environments where resources of potential value to advance education in the region might be present.

Illustrative promising practices. Examples of how an ESA can serve as an advocate that are primarily directed at a leadership role in the region are

- developing a system to access comprehensive databases on the condition of education in the region;
- providing periodic reports on the condition of education in the region;
- commissioning a periodic inventory of human, fiscal, and physical resources in the region to aid the advancement of education;

- providing access to the timely monitoring of federal and state legislative activity in education and related fields that are of possible consequence to education in the region; and
- sponsoring periodic forums, panels, and symposia on contemporary or projected policy issues impacting education in the region.

Examples of how an ESA can advocate the interests of the region to external groups are disseminating newsletters highlighting events in the region to state and national organizations in the public and private sectors:

- writing, or causing to have written, articles on exemplary activities in the region for publication in state and nationally-oriented periodicals targeted on the education and related communities;
- making, or causing to have made, presentations on exemplary activities in the region at state and national meetings of education and related professional associations; and
- sponsoring staff involvement of state and national organizations as resources for the work of the previously recommended special interest groups and regional alliances.

Serve as a Prototype Educational Organization

This fourth and final core objective is a relatively straightforward proposal. It calls on the agency to serve as a prototype educational organization in the region committed to the promotion of high standards of quality and effectiveness and subject to rigorous standards of accountability in its own operations. This commitment would result in both self-serving and symbolic benefits for the agency and subsequently for the advancement of education. Exercising high standards, striving for effectiveness in everything it does, and being extraordinarily accountable have the obvious benefits of solidifying the support of the agency's clients. Among other gains, this should also lessen the need for the frequent and often poorly designed state-sponsored assessments that many ESAs have been subjected to over the years–in some cases almost annually.

The symbolic benefits of an ESA exercising high standards of performance and accountability may, however, be even more rewarding for the advancement of education in the region. By demonstrating a commitment to be responsive and accountable to its clients, an ESA can contribute to raising the norms of educational practice in the region. It is not unreasonable to assume, for example, that an ESA consistently adhering to quality standards in its programming efforts serves as a role model for others. It is not unreasonable to assume that

an ESA paying strict attention to quality-of-work life considerations in its own organization will also cause others in the region to more carefully examine this issue in their own organization.

An ESA can contribute to "habits of the mind" in many other ways that together will contribute to the advancement of education in its service region. It is imperative that they assume the vital leadership role that they can play in demonstrating for all that yes, indeed, there is an organization in public education truly committed to high performance standards and accountability in every aspect of its work.

Illustrative promising practices. Examples of promising practices to achieve this core objective are

- establishing advisory groups in all major program and service clusters, and granting to these groups substantial decision-making authority;
- sponsoring standards governing all programming and operational features of the agency, unilaterally if necessary, but preferably with other ESAs in the state network;[14]
- implementing principles of total quality management in the work of the agency;
- sponsoring and publicly disclosing periodic money-flow studies of how the agency expends resources in support of school improvement or assessed against the criteria of equity and adequacy;
- sponsoring and publicly disclosing an annual internal evaluation of the effectiveness of programs and services;
- commissioning and publicly disclosing periodic external evaluations of agency effectiveness; and
- in the composition of the governing board, seeking to reflect in an appropriate and equitable way, the number of local districts, irrespective of enrollment size.

Capitalizing on the Synergistic Qualities of an ESA

It is in the leadership roles envisioned here for an ESA that organizations of this type can capitalize on the potentially powerful synergistic qualities they possess. The cross-walking of their expertise in content areas central to school improvement with their expertise in the processes needed to achieve these goals can result in a strong and bold voice–and action–for the advancement of education in the region.

An educational service agency, of course, cannot alone stem the ongoing socioeconomic and political forces impacting rural communi-

ties and their school districts that will result in both winners and losers. What they can and must do, however, is fully exercise their potential to help ensure that the playing field is level–as the transformation in rural America continues. That is, they can help ensure that Howley, Howley, and Pendarvis' (1995) challenge that "all schools nurture the talents of all who enter their door" (p. 209) is met.

Moreover, and equally critical, the positioning of an ESA to take full advantage of its synergistic qualities will make important contributions to the strengthening of public education–which continues to be under serious attack in many quarters, some fully warranted, some not. Boyer's (1993) comments in a foreword to a collection of papers on school choice, titled *School Choice: Examining the Evidence,* can probably not be overused in this time of crisis. Boyer reminds all who will listen:

> The nation's public schools collectively remain one of America's most vital institutions with the mission of sustaining a democratic nation as well as serving the individual. When all is said and done, we dare not permit the current debate about choice to blur this vision. The goal must be to make every public school a source of national strength in pursuit of *excellence for all.* We must choose nothing less. (p. xiv)

Many circumstances seem to have converged that suggest that the leadership role outlined here would not be merely well-received, but enthusiastically welcomed. These include the apparent long-term downsizing of both federal and state governments, as well as the greater acceptance that many school districts–urban, suburban, and rural alike–clearly cannot nor should go it alone and, therefore, must reach out and seek collaboration with others. The window of opportunity available to ESAs to step forward is not likely to be more open.

Appendix

The Rural District School Improvement Process

In chapters 2 and 3, an attempt was made to first establish the object, that is, the "what" of school improvement efforts that are expected of rural school districts, followed by an assessment of the institutional capacity that systems of this type are likely to bring to this task. However, discussion of the object of improvement efforts and an assessment of the resources present to support side efforts is just part of the issue. There is also the equally important need for rural systems to design a *process* to achieve their goals. The focus here, then, is on "how" rural districts can engage in a process "marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result" (Webster, 1977, p. 917).

Fortunately for rural interests, and ultimately educational service agency interests as well, there is available extensive literature that will prove to be invaluable to them in their efforts to design a process that will greatly enhance success. This literature is based on relatively recent work in the social and behavioral sciences that has provided insights into various dimensions of the school improvement process. Especially useful is the knowledge base on factors that promote and inhibit organizational change, including the importance of organizational culture, factors that appear to affect organizational development, conditions that tend to foster the adoption of innovations in educational organizations, and other aspects central to an understanding of the dynamics of organizational change and development.

The discussion of the perspective of the rural school improvement process adopted here is organized into three parts. It begins with a review of the most important lessons learned in recent work; these propositions are considered valuable in the design of a school improvement process regardless of the context–urban, suburban, or rural. This is followed by a review of the most useful lessons learned tailored for a

rural school improvement process. The chapter concludes with a detailed illustration of a rural school improvement process that incorporates many of the previously identified lessons learned.

Lessons Learned About the School Improvement Process in General

The relatively rich recent work on institutional change in education has produced a number of lessons learned about facets of the change process likely to result in success. The following 12 propositions are especially valuable for the *process* of school improvement, as opposed to the substantive content of the school improvement agenda discussed in a previous chapter.

1. There is not at this time, nor is there ever likely to be, a generic process that fits the needs of all local school districts equally well.
2. The process must be based on a plan, though hyperrational planning often leads to failure.
3. Overloading the process will result in paralysis; the way to minimize this outcome is to provide participants a comprehensive framework that stresses the systemic and incremental nature of the effort.
4. The process must promote strategic thinking on the part of participants.
5. The process must be viewed as a journey, not an end.
6. The process must be viewed as nonlinear, with appropriate checks and balances in place to assess whether or not the journey is proceeding as planned and on schedule.
7. The process must enjoy the unwavering commitment and active participation of key internal stakeholders who must always believe they have ownership.
8. The process, as well as the substantive content, must be compatible with the participants' values.
9. The process must be sensitive to, and make appropriate accommodation for, common barriers to institutional change that could affect how change is to occur.
10. There must be external pressure for a district to initiate a school improvement process on the scale required to address the agenda envisioned.

11. The process must provide for enhancing the quality of the work of participants through enriching networking experiences.
12. Most local school districts, regardless of size or available human or fiscal resources, need technical assistance to engage in a systemic reform process.

The knowledge base on the process of change in education, as Miles (1993) reminds us, ". . . has in fact cumulated, become more coherent" (p. 244), a theme also stressed by Sashkin and Egermeier (1993) in their synthesis of the research and practice on change models and processes. The work of many in the research and school improvement communities who have contributed to this growing knowledge base greatly influenced formation of these 12 propositions.

To be successful, the process must not just facilitate, but continuously nourish strategic thinking of all participants. Above all, this means that the process must allow all participants time, resources, and information to reflect on the opportunities and current and future threats impacting the organization, identify the organization's strengths and weaknesses, and consider strategic options available to the district. Further, the process must allow for time, resources, and information to develop a shared vision concerning the district's future. The process also must encourage discussion and debate about the most desirable future state of the district and, beyond that, what is possible for the organization.

There is little disagreement that the process of school improvement must be viewed as a journey, not an end. Some observers who stress this point do so on the premise that, as Fullan and Miles (1992) stated, "There can be no blueprint for change because rational planning models for complex and social change . . . do not work" (p. 749). These authors, who have impressive credentials in the school reform movement, prefer to view the process as ". . . a guided journey" (p. 749). On another occasion, Fullan (1994) cautioned that a program or project innovation is likely to take 3 to 5 years, but the guided journey to institutionalize reform will require more than 5 years.

The issue of whether or not educational organizations can benefit from a rational planning model will be discussed below. There would be no disagreement here if Fullan's concerns had to do with what can be called "hyperrational" planning models. I prefer to view school improvement as a long-term guided journey, not an end. The likelihood is remote that the perfect school district offering the very best program will ever exist. However, it is necessary for those having a legal or ethical responsibility to accept the challenge that the search for utopia is long-term and must never end.

The need for both internal and external support systems that allow for and encourage school reform has been stressed by Schlechty and Cole (1991) who caution that, "without such systems, it is unlikely that the structural and cultural changes needed to transform schools will occur" (p. 79). Fullan (1994) also acknowledged the validity of the assumption that pressure for change is necessary even for people who know in what direction they want to go. However, Fullan cautions that external pressure "will be effective under conditions that allow them to react, to form their own position, to interact with other implementors, to obtain technical assistance . . ." (p. 6).

Compatibility between the values of the various school and community stakeholders and those being pursued in the school improvement agenda is an uncontested proposition. It has been stressed by Schlechty and Cole (1991) and by Fullan (1994) who stated that ". . . changing the culture of institutions is the real agenda" (p. 6). To be especially mindful that the values of one of the key stakeholder groups, teachers, are compatible with those of the reform agenda is one of the conclusions reached by Howley, Bickel, Ferrell, and Leary (1994) in their study of the congruence between the belief systems of West Virginia teachers and the values that underlie reforms undertaken in that state. Howley et al. caution that "even in a state as supposedly homogeneous as West Virginia, there appears to be considerable diversity in values and attitudes of those whose task it is to implement reform" (p. 72).

Olson's (1994) interviews with leaders of the major scaling-up school reform networks also proved to be instructive. One of the lessons learned offered by the interviewees was that access to technical assistance is vital for the continued growth and success of their initiatives. Another lesson learned is to provide networking opportunities to the participants of the reform movements. The importance of networking is also cited by Fuhrman (1994) as one strategy used by states to build capacity for the reform movement, to create ". . . motivation for change through support, recognition and increased access to knowledge" (p. 5). Networking is also given prominence in the Iowa Chautauqua Program and in programs that were validated by the U.S. Department of Education National Diffusion Network (Educational Programs That Work, 1995). Many single-purpose projects that have met the rigorous validation standards of the National Diffusion Network also emphasize networking (e.g., QUILT, a program of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory).

Fullan and Miles (1992) speak to the danger of overloading the process in their discussions of barriers to organizational change. Two of the barriers cited–lack of capacity and limited resources–address proposition 3 cited above. The lack of capacity suggests the need for

technical assistance. The issue of limited resources, or the condition Fullan and Miles refer to as "resource hungry" (p. 750), is in part another justification for the proposition that external support will ordinarily be required.

Lessons Learned About the Rural School Improvement Process

With certain modifications, all of the preceding 12 propositions apply equally well to a process undertaken by a rural school district. The first modification adds the community to the seventh proposition, which would read as follows: The process must enjoy the unwavering commitment and active participation of key internal stakeholders *and those in the rural community* who must always believe they have ownership. The second would change the first part of proposition 12 to read: *All rural* local school districts need technical assistance to engage in a process that will lead to the systemic reform that they chose to follow.

Brief comments concerning these two modifications follow. These comments refer to the work of the federally supported regional educational laboratories (RELs) created approximately three decades ago to enhance the knowledge base on the complexities of school improvement. More recently, in 1987, the RELs were charged with the specific mandate, and given additional earmarked funds, to devote staff and resources to expand the knowledge base on rural school improvement. The U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee directed the U.S. Department of Education to fund the RELs to create a "Rural Initiative" that would:

> . . . launch a new program that will identify and support the development of promising rural, small school activities and practices within their regions and disseminate information about these practices. The Committee expects the laboratories' boards of directors to assess the rural, small schools needs in their regions and to submit to the Department scopes of work in order to receive an equitable share of the funding. Finally the Committee expects the laboratories to submit to the Department for submission to Congress, no later than September 30, 1988, a status report on the condition of education in rural, small schools (OERI, 1988, p. 4).

As I have indicated in testimony before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education, Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives, the specific

targeting of part of the work of the laboratories on rural education issues over the past several years has added immensely to the rural education literature. Further, some of the best work on rural education is now being done by the laboratories. Some of the most knowledgeable individuals in the nation on rural school improvement efforts are to be found on the staffs of the RELs. Together, these specialists represent a critical mass and a huge national resource on rural education issues (Stephens, 1993). It is for reasons such as these that one can profitably look at the work of the laboratories for guidelines in the design of a rural school improvement process.

An example of the contributions of the national network of RELs to an understanding of rural school improvement issues is their recently published report, *Pulling Together: R & D Resources for Rural Schools* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1995). This report includes a brief description of approximately 250 R & D resources available from the laboratories specially designed for or tested in rural settings. The report also provides a synthesis of critical factors that promote implementation of a single innovation or institutionalization of broader-based change in rural schools and districts. Seven factors were highlighted and are described in table 16. While all seven have implications for this paper, four are of particular significance for what is highlighted in this chapter (factors 1, 4, 6, and 7).

Involvement of Community

There is a need to involve the rural community in the rural district school improvement process. This emphasis stems in large part from the unusually close bond that typically characterizes the relationship between schools and the communities they serve, a point stressed earlier. However, while development of a clear consensus among members of the rural community appears to be deceptively easy, it may not be. Many rural communities are characterized by a degree of homogeneity in outlook not found in larger metropolitan areas; however, many of the conflicting philosophical issues historically surrounding public education are present in rural communities, just as in urban and suburban areas. This likely situation adds further rationale to the inclusion of community stakeholders in the rural school improvement process.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) recognized the critical importance of community in its "Successful Schools Project." Building on NWREL's "Onward to Excellence" school improvement strategy, this project targets very small, rural schools with enrollments of less than 300, all housed in a single building. Importantly, the model has been field tested in approximately 40 sites

Table 16
National Network of Regional Educational Laboratories
Synthesis of Factors Promoting Innovations in Rural Districts

Common Factors	Brief Description
1. Accessibility, Availability, and Adaptability	Chances of adoption increase if staff can see innovation in operation; change must be available when staff need it and are ready for it; design must be sufficiently flexible so that staff can adapt it to their own needs.
2. Relevance and Compatibility	Innovation must fit needs of staff; evidence of field test in similar schools must be provided.
3. Quality	Innovations can be more credible if endorsed by a large-scale dissemination effort; they generally require documentation of claims with empirical data.
4. Redundancy of Message	Knowledge of innovation must be received from a variety of sources; staff need assistance with accessing information.
5. Linkage Among Users	Access to other users to share experience with innovation is helpful.
6. Engagement	Schools and districts are more likely to implement an innovation if large numbers of staff are involved and comfortable with it; outside "facilitator" sometimes is helpful.
7. Sustained Interactivity	Ready access to technical assistance personnel who are knowledgeable about innovation is needed; likelihood that innovation will work well increases with frequent before-and-after communication between staff and technical assistance personnel through staff development.

Source: National Network of Regional Educational Laboratories. (1995). *Pulling together: R & D resources for rural schools.* pp. 19-20, Oak Brook, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.

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since 1988, though it is designed to work with schools or districts regardless of size. Two basic assumptions made by NWREL that drive its small, rural schools improvement strategy stress the link between the rural school and community: "rural schools are the heart of the community" and "improvement efforts in rural schools should begin by determining the role of the rural school in the community" (NWREL, nd, p. 5). These basic assumptions are reflected in activities and strategies used by NWREL in working with school districts, some of which will be reviewed subsequently.

The new, ambitious Annenberg Rural Challenge (1995) stresses various forms of community engagement in several of its three sets of principles and characteristics of "genuinely good" rural schools it is willing to support. One of the principles and characteristics that speaks most directly to the need for community involvement in the school improvement process is very clear in its intent:

> Schools that empower teachers, parents, and community members to participate actively and meaningfully in the school's governance and policymaking. Such schools insist on the involvement of staff, family, and community members in the school improvement process. (p. 9)

Fielder (1993), the chief administrative officer of Grant Wood Area Education Agency in Iowa, is also very emphatic in his insistence that there be extensive community involvement in designing a school improvement strategy. His approach in working with schools, many of them rural, in fact carries the title "School/Community Planning: A Foundation for Successful School Improvement." The strategy uses a series of activities that are designed in part to awaken the community to the needs for educational change, to develop informed leadership, and to involve the community in suggesting the district's desired future.

All Rural Districts Need Technical Assistance

The proposition that all rural districts need technical assistance to initiate their school improvement process seems indisputable. The reasons that this is so have absolutely nothing to do with the quality and commitment of rural educators and rural residents. Rather, it has to do, in large part, with common weaknesses in the institutional capacity of rural systems. Especially critical is the frequent absence of adequate management, planning, and evaluation support systems required to launch and sustain a school improvement process.

The assumption that rural districts, in particular, need technical assistance serves as a basis for many of the major initiatives designed to provide assistance to these types of systems. This is especially true of

several relatively recent and, at the time of their beginning, precedent-setting federal initiatives. These include the start in 1987 of the "Rural Initiative" of the regional educational laboratories; the establishment in 1988 of the Chapter I rural technical assistance centers; and the 1994 National Science Foundation's Rural Systemic Initiatives in Science, Mathematics, and Technology Education. Several states, such as Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, have, as part of their reform efforts, moved to provide technical assistance to rural districts by creating regional staff development and/or technical assistance centers. Further, supporters of the position that one of the most meaningful ways to assist rural districts is to strengthen the capacity-building skills and competencies of local staff also acknowledge that these efforts are likely to be most effective when given support by an external trainer, change agent, or facilitator.

A review of the technical assistance provided by two of the regional educational laboratories demonstrates the nature of efforts proven effective for enhancing a rural district's school improvement process. Highlights of the previously cited NWREL "Successful Schools Process" are shown in table 17 (p. 106). Technical assistance is provided a rural school in an orientation session and four workshops that extend over a period of several months. A follow-up session is also scheduled during the following year. The second illustration is of work done and field tested by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) at five rural sites over a five-year period. This extended contact by an external trainer, change agent, or facilitator is unusual, as well as extraordinary. It also ought to add confidence in the work of SEDL to provide technical assistance to rural systems. Highlights of the process used by SEDL are shown in table 18 (p. 107).

The purpose for citing these two in-depth illustrations is not necessarily to hold them up as examples of how technical assistance for a rural school improvement process must occur, though both incorporate many meritorious features. One could argue, I suppose, with the specific activities included in any detailed description of most approaches. What cannot be debated, though, is the demonstration of a deep level of commitment apparent in these two designs. Further, both designs are based on a plan, a road map supporting this deep committment. This is precisely what is required to support the type of technical assistance that rural districts need to successfully initiate and sustain a school improvement process that enhances their improvement agenda.

Table 17
Selected Features of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Successful Schools Process

Activity	Selected Features
Orientation Session	Acquaint participants with process; complete "Successful Schools Inventory"; participants make decision to proceed or not to proceed with the improvement process.
Workshop One	Discuss results of "Successful Schools Inventory"; clarify mission of school; identify two specific purposes (strengths and needed improvements); form three groups to collect data (one focuses on current strengths, one on current areas needing improvement, one on community perspectives); assign group data gathering and community and graduate follow-up study tasks.
Workshop Two	Discuss three group reports and compare to initial perceptions secured at orientation session; through consensus, identify a specific goal to become the emphasis of the improvement efforts (i.e., specific, assessable student performance); assign homework tasks including the identification of strategies to achieve goal through brainstorming sessions with school and community groups, and reading selected research literature.
Workshop Three	Review three group reports; in small groups use research on influences on learning and instructional practices to develop a framework for an action plan that is then ranked; facilitator links research to action plan and identifies potentially valuable external resources; assign homework tasks including the development of strategies and activities to implement preliminary action plan.
Workshop Four	Conduct comprehensive review of preliminary action plan; make modifications; identify resources needed to monitor progress; seek board adoption on final version of action plan; acknowledge progress being made on school improvement process publicly (in special cases, a fifth workshop is conducted).
Follow-up Visit	Visit on-site during following year to assess effectiveness of the action plan and provide other assistance; conduct interviews with participants who also complete a second "Successful Schools Inventory" (compare with copies of pre-and posttest results for internal evaluation of progress).

Source: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. (nd). *Successful school process.* Portland, OR: Author. pp. 1-4.

Table 18
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's School Improvement Partnership Process

Phase	Specific Activities
I. Establishing the School Improvement Partnership Process	Engage interest in the process; make initial contact; hold a briefing meeting to (1) share expectations (site needs and needs for a successful effort); (2) define role of change facilitator in the effort; (3) discuss issues and answer commonly asked questions; (4) solicit district commitment and support; (5) commit site participation; (6) suggest roles for demonstration school; (7) define partners' roles; (8) propose a timeline of events; (9) define resources necessary to support the process; (10) develop a public relations plan; (11) identify next steps.
II. Introducing the Process and Activating the Leadership Team	(1) Provide overview of the process; (2) review team roles; (3) identify team members; (4) develop the leadership team; (5) empower team members; (6) identify "responsible person"; (7) develop or review the school's mission statement; (8) refine the timeline and list of resources.
III. Assessing Current Site Conditions	(1) Provide training in effective schools research and in the school improvement process; (2) collect data about current conditions; (3) disaggregate data; (4) analyze and interpret the combined data sets; (5) share the results of data analysis with staff in small groups; (6) brainstorm possible explanations or causes and potential solutions.
IV. Setting Goals and Specifying Objectives	(1) Identify school needs based on data; (2) prioritize needs and select those that are critical and doable for immediate attention; (3) formulate school improvement goals based on prioritized needs; (4) formulate student objectives based on school goals; (5) develop a precise picture of improvement-related behaviors; (6) examine school resources and constraints; (7) identify/locate additional resources from partners; (8) locate and solicit resources from others; (9) complete action plans for priority need(s); (10) share action plans and solicit feedback from all relevant participants; (11) revise plan based on feedback; (12) share revised plan with participants.

(continued)

Source: Hord, S.M., Jolly, D.J., Mendez-Morse, S., & Vaughan, M. (1990). *Guidebook for the educational change facilitator.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Table 18 (continued)
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's School Improvement Partnership Process

Phase	Specific Activities
V. Supporting Implementation of the School Improvement Partnership Process	(1) Provide resources; (2) train all staff and participants; (3) deliver individualized technical assistance or consultation; (4) monitor progress; (5) provide additional resources, training, assistance; (6) review action plans and revise; (7) continue process; (8) assess achievement of objectives; (9) assess degree of implementation; (10) celebrate success.
VI. Recycling the Process	(1) Determine outcomes of the effort (student gains and teacher behavior and administrator change) based on assessment; (2) decide course of action; (3) detect "mushrooms."
VII. Moving the Process into Standard Operational Procedure	(1) Conduct summative evaluation; (2) identify processes that are "routinized."

Guidelines for Implementing A Rural District Improvement Process

Although there is no generic model that can be used by every rural district to implement a school improvement process, there are useful guidelines for strategic planning that can enhance the potential for an effective and sustainable process. What follows is a discussion of those guidelines.

The literature on strategic planning is so extensive that one could observe that there are as many planning models now available as there were "roads leading to ancient Rome." However, there does appear to be general agreement with McCune (1986) that the following characteristics must be present in whatever model is used:

> It should be futuristic and based on analysis of economic, social, political, and educational trends; the plan should include internal scanning to determine the existing capacity of the organization and what is needed to accomplish the proposed mission and tasks; it should have a statement of assumptions, approaches, mission, and goals, which provide direction for all groups; it should allow for the involvement and participation of representatives or the total population of all groups of shareholders; [and,] it should have implementation plans, which outline specific activities to attain the mission. (p. 5)

Two approaches to strategic planning are drawn on extensively for framing the guidelines that follow, especially those included in the discussion of Phase 2: Develop Strategic Plan. These are the approaches advocated by Cook (1988) and Lewis (1983). Both honor McCune's characteristics. Importantly, both reflect the previously cited 12 propositions concerning what is likely to succeed in a school improvement process. Moreover, the Cook approach was selected, in part, because of its widespread dissemination and extensive use in the educational community in recent years. The Lewis approach was selected primarily because it offers guidance in working through a number of complex activities that ought to occur in a strategic planning exercise specifically targeted to a local school district.

Furthermore, in recent years, I have had several experiences using the guidelines that have permitted a degree of field testing. These include their use in several large and small local school districts and with several educational service agencies in their planning exercises. Additionally, the guidelines were used and field tested as part of the field-experience requirement in a graduate seminar offered over the

past 5 years. An outline of the rural school improvement process is provided in figure 7.

Phase 1. Get started: Mobilize school and community

Phase 2. Develop strategic plan
- Establish guidance system
- Develop strategic policies
- Conduct critical analysis
- Generate long-range goals
- Establish short-range objectives
- Establish strategies for achievement of mission
- Develop action plans
- Establish planning controls
- Develop evaluation plan

Phase 3. Implement action plan

Phase 4. Monitor implementation plan

Phase 5. Institutionalize school improvement plan

Figure 7. Outline of Rural School Improvement Process

Phase 1: Get Started

Key decisions and actions that should occur in phase 1 include the following:

- securing the commitment of the governing board to the process and to the earmarking of staff and fiscal resources;
- selecting a school improvement steering committee composed of a cross section of the community, district staff, and students;
- appointing subcommittees by the steering committee in each of the key areas of the school improvement agenda (e.g., access for special populations of students), or some logical combination of two or more key areas of the agenda; and

- establishing the roles, expectations, and tentative timelines for the work of the steering committee and each subcommittee.

Phase 2: Develop Strategic Plan

The strategic planning exercise outlined below is the heart of the school improvement process. A large number of decisions and actions, organized around nine subphases, should occur in phase 2.

Establish guidance system. This is the first and most important set of actions in the entire exercise. The guidance system consists of a statement of beliefs and a mission statement, both centering on the district's intentions regarding its school improvement agenda.

According to Cook (1988), the statement of beliefs should serve two principal functions: It establishes at the outset the value system accepted by the community upon which all other features of the school improvement agenda will be developed and evaluated, and is also a public declaration of what the school district is all about (p. 89). To be effective, a statement of beliefs should be composed of short, precise statements, and not be a philosophical treatise (Cook, pp. 89-91). Lewis' (1983) recommendation that the statements be framed using a "we believe" approach, or a "role statement" approach, is also helpful (pp. 51-54). I have found it to be critically important that the statements be framed in a consistent way, not mixing the two approaches.

The mission statement, according to Cook (1988), should clearly and concisely express the district's purpose and function regarding its school improvement agenda and should consist of a single declarative sentence representing the district's bold declaration of its vision (pp. 91-92). Properly written, a mission statement serves two purposes: it can serve as a test of the strategic plan while, at the same time, the strategic plan can test the mission statement (pp. 91-92). Cook disagrees with other writers in the planning community who compare mission statements to the platforms of political parties that tend to be forgotten once the ink has dried.

Develop strategic policies. Strategic policies are not policies in the traditional sense of the term, but rather they establish the limitations the district and community place upon themselves vis-a-vis the mission of the district. As Cook (1988) argues, they establish the boundaries, including things that the district will never do, or conversely, will always do. Strategic policies are usually stated in the negative. To be useful, these policies must be enforceable and controllable, definitive in their terms, and practical (pp. 93-95).

Conduct critical analysis. The placement of this part of the exercise prior to, not after, the development of long-range goals and short-range objectives represents a fundamental difference between the approach to strategic planning argued for here and other approaches. Doing so is necessary if, in fact, the objective of strategic planning (pursuing what is feasible) is to differ from a traditional planning exercise that frequently begins with a needs assessment (pursuing an ideal without first considering what is possible). Completing a statement of beliefs and mission, if properly done, should establish adequate parameters on what is ideal. The previously completed statement of strategic policies will also contribute to this same objective.

The function of a critical analysis is to identify, analyze, and evaluate the key trends, factors, forces, and other phenomena both within and outside the organization that have the potential to impact on the previously agreed-to belief and mission statements. This critical analysis can take several forms. According to Lewis (1995), however, it should probably at a minimum consist of the following:

- An assessment of the major strengths and weaknesses of services, programs, activities, and products that the rural district currently provides that have either a positive or negative effect on its mission; the assessment should include all subsystems of the organization (e.g., governance, management, staff, finance, facilities, and of course programs and services) that currently or potentially bear on the mission.
- A competition analysis; that is, what organizations currently operate in the region that presently or potentially serve as competitors to the rural district's mission, and what is the significance of this analysis for the development of the rural district's strategy (Lewis, 1995, pp. 40-41; Cook, 1988, pp. 107-110).
- A stakeholders' analysis; that is, what is the likely response of key stakeholders to the mission statement, and what is the significance of this analysis for the district's strategy (Lewis, 1995, pp. 42-43).
- A threat analysis; that is, what existing or potentially new threats are out there in the district's external environment, and what is the significance of these for the district's strategy (Lewis, 1995, pp. 43-44).
- An opportunity analysis; that is, what existing or potentially new opportunities are in the external environment and the significance of these for the district's strategy.

The final activity argued for here is that the planning committee then prepare a set of:

noncontrollable planning assumptions; semicontrollable planning assumptions; and controllable planning assumptions (Lewis, 1995, p. 88; Cook, 1988, pp. 104-106), based on the one internal and four external analyses outlined above.

Generate long-range goals. This step involves the establishment of long-range goals that clarify the mission of the rural district. A long-range goal is a written, specific, and measurable task assignment designated for the district to achieve over a long time period, ordinarily 5 years. Long-range goals should be set in those areas where results are essential to achieve the district's mission, are sufficiently difficult to ensure a high level of organizational and individual effort, but not too difficult to make them impossible to achieve (Lewis, 1995, pp. 64-65).

Two approaches to goal-setting are in general use. These include the "improvement-action" approach that begins with an action verb preceded by the word "to," indicates the present and desired or projected results, and states the time span for accomplishment. The second approach is the "prediction" method that stipulates the time phase, then predicts the performance results (Lewis, 1995, pp. 65-66). There are also a number of ways to establish the performance level desired for each goal: minimal performance level, critical performance level, aspirational performance level, and optimal performance level (pp. 75-79).

Establish short-range objectives. These are statements of results to be achieved typically within a one-year period that will contribute to the attainment of a long-range goal. They are formalized in writing in a standardized format (either an improvement-action or prediction approach), realistic, and related to the previously established planning assumptions (Lewis, 1995, pp. 136-137).

Establish strategies for achievement of mission. One of the most important parts of the exercise is the list of strategies that make the plan strategic. They are, according to Cook (1988), the articulation of a commitment by the rural district to deploy resources toward the stated mission, goals, and objectives. They tell how the goals and objectives, thus the mission, are to be realized (p. 113). Therefore, continues Cook, strategy statements must be flexible as they are translated into the action plan. They must be broad statements because over specificity or narrow focus reduces them to no more than routine operational details and robs the strategic plan of its authority to establish long-term "positioning" of the district. The power and control of the strategic plan must rest with the strategies themselves, not in the authorities behind them (p. 114).

Develop action plans. This step involves the detailed description of the specific actions required by the rural district and community to achieve the results necessary to implement the strategies (Cook, 1988, p. 115). Each strategy will likely be developed by several such action plans, all containing at a minimum a specific reference to the strategy it supports, step-by-step directions, time lines; assignment of responsibilities; and a cost-benefits analysis (p. 116). Action plans are not to be considered the implementation phase of the planning process. They are plans and only plans (p. 116).

Establish planning controls. To be effective, controls must be directly related to all other phases of the planning exercise for the rural district–its mission statement, long-range goals, short-range objectives, strategies, and action plans. Moreover, planning controls must provide comprehensive information about the status of the district's strategic plans so that corrective action can be taken when what is intended is not what is occurring (Lewis, 1995, p. 192).

Develop evaluation plan. To be effective, the evaluation plan must provide the steering committee with comprehensive, valid information in a timely manner on all aspects of the strategic planning exercise.

Phase 3: Implement Action Plan

Key decisions and actions that should occur in phase 3 include the intensive training of staff expected to take lead roles in the implementation of the agenda and the provision of adequate human and fiscal resources to ensure that the action plans will be implemented.

Phase 4: Monitor Implementation Plan

Key decisions and actions that should occur in this phase include establishing a reliable and timely reporting system for reviewing implementation activities and establishing procedures for conducting summative evaluations and for taking corrective actions for poorly performing activities.

Phase 5: Institutionalize School Improvement Plan

Key decisions and actions that should occur in this phase include developing governing board policies, companion administrative rules and regulations, and the reallocation of human and fiscal resources that are necessary to support the agenda.

Endnotes

1. See Stephens (1993) for a discussion of several long-standing myths on the performance of rural districts on four widely used outcome indicators: (1) student achievement (their scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress are comparable to national mean scores), (2) their scores are close to the national average on the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, (3) their dropout rates are below the national rate, and (4) their participation rate in post-secondary education is comparable to national rates when socioeconomic status is considered.

2. Many observers have commented on the significant decline in the number of rural districts due in large part to the massive pressures in the 1950s and 1960s to mandate district reorganization. Sher and Tompkins (1976) offered the observation that "the most successfully implemented educational policy of the past fifty years has been the consolidation of rural schools and rural districts" (p. 1). Guthrie (1980) referred to the decline in the number of rural systems as "one of the most awesome and least publicized governmental changes in the nation in the 20th century" (p. 120).

3. The remaining four extraordinary state policy strategies cited were (1) reorganizing small enrollment size districts into larger administrative units, (2) promoting the use of distance-learning technologies, (3) modifying state funding formulas to reflect sparsity or promote use of other revenue enhancement plans, and (4) establishing a state network of state-governed regional technical assistance centers (Stephens, 1992, p. 37).

4. The qualifier "all things being equal" acknowledges that some state networks of ESAs perform regulatory functions and other services for the state education agency (e.g., certification of teachers, school reorganization studies) that may not be easily spun off to another agency, especially when state education agencies are being downsized.

5. On other occasions I have included the current county offices of education in other states (e.g., Arizona, Montana, North Dakota) in listings of statewide networks of ESAs. While several of the units in each of these states provide services to local districts in a fairly comprehensive way, most do not. Therefore, they are not included in the profile.

6. The second phase of efforts to create a national database will concentrate on selected programming features of individual ESAs holding membership in the American Association of Educational Service Agencies. The third is to emphasize detailed financial features of individual ESAs and data on ESA program participation (e.g., students, staff, schools, school districts served) (Stephens, 1994).

7. The two remaining categories used in the typology were instructional support services for nonpublic schools and services for the state education agency.

8. Providing services to disabled students is the most common state mandated requirement for ESAs. Other frequently cited mandated requirements are in the areas of staff development, media/technology, and school district reorganization (Stephens, Spies, Archambault, & Findley, 1967; Stephens, 1979; Stephens & Christiansen, 1995).

9. Legislative pressure to document the cost-savings of programs and services provided by an ESA also appears to be on the rise. Several state legislatures in recent years have mandated that such a study be completed (e.g., New York, Oregon, Washington, West Virginia).

10. The American Association of Educational Service Agencies also retains the services of a part-time executive secretary who monitors federal legislation. This effort also enriches the ability of an ESA to provide local districts with information on current federal legislative developments that frequently precede state legislative developments.

11. In Iowa, for example, state aid to all local districts for special education is passed through to an Area Education Agency. This practice illustrates efforts to achieve both equity and efficiency in the use of state funds in support of disabled students.

12. The methodology used in state-sponsored and ESA-sponsored cost-savings studies is the subject of an article by Stephens and Harmon (1996) in *Perspectives*, the journal of The American Association of Educational Service Agencies. This report describes programs and services included, the ingredients and values used to establish ESA operating costs, and methods used to calculate cost savings.

13. See Young (1989) for an interesting discussion of the implications for educational service agencies of the site-based management movement.

14. In 1989-90, only six state networks (Georgia, Nebraska, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, and Wisconsin) had in place a state accreditation system governing their operations (Stephens, 1990). No major increase in this number has occurred in the ensuing years. The renewed interest in the accountability of all public sector organizations will likely result in a change in this situation in the near future.

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ural education reform is best understood in the larger context of the national movement to improve public education, a moveme that many observers consider being of historic proportions. Rur schools should be, and are, full partners in this movement. Toda several forces have converged to put increasing pressure on rur schools to improve: national and state reform legislation, cour decisions, and global economic impacts on rural economies. Although recent studies have developed an understanding and appreciatic for the particular strengths of rural schools and communities, educators i rural places also face severe infrastructural and organizational challenges These challenges cannot be ignored if states intend to succeed in meeting their school improvement goals.

E. Robert Stephens sees one group–educational service agencies–as uniquely positioned to provide not only indispensable first-line support t rural school districts, but also leadership in meeting today's challenges. I Expanding the Vision, Stephens explains how these providers can help districts set their own agendas, and develop their own approaches for accomplishing their goals.

E. Robert Stephens, Ph.D., is the director of the Institute for Regional an Rural Studies in Education (Edmond, Oklahoma) and professor emeritus. University of Maryland, College Park. A past president of the National Rural Education Association, Stephens is a national authority on rural education and educational service agencies. He has directed many major research projects investigating various aspects of educational policy, governance, and administration. He has written 13 books and monograph and scores of journal articles, chapters, and technical reports.

This monograph was written in cooperation with the American Associatio of Educational Service Agencies.

The Rural Center
AEL, Inc.
P. O. Box 1348,
Charleston, WV 25325

ISBN 1-891677-00-4